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["I WISH I WERE WITH YOU," SAID LINDA. "I AM LOOKING FOR A SITUATION."]

THE BROWN LADY.

CHAPTER I.

CHRISTMAS EVE, eight o'clock at night, inky darkness outside, a heavy, sullen rain pouring down steadily. Inside, a cheerful family circle, relations and friends lately united, with merry, happy faces, brilliant lights, blazing fire, a luxurious room, and a well-spread board laden with Christmas dainties.

Nothing of the kind presents itself in the scene before us. A bare apartment, a dying fire, one tallow candle, the remains of a frugal meal, i.e., the bones of a herring, and an empty tea-cup; and seated on a low chair, cowering over the fender to catch the last gleams of warmth, a very pretty girl—without a friend in the world, without any fortune, except her face, and two shillings and fourpence in her old leather purse.

She has not a relation that she knows of; she is ignorant of any accomplishment that would help her to earn her daily bread, and

at the present dismal moment, as she sits shivering over the almost empty grate, she sees the hag starvation within measurable distance; indeed, there is nothing now between them but a miserable twenty-eight pence!

And how came this girl to find herself in such desperate straits? To explain this I must relate her previous history in as few words as possible.

As an infant she was left in charge of an old lady, who lived in a remote village in Cheshire; who her parents were, why she lived with Miss Mee, she never learnt. She remembered no other home than Miss Mee's neat cottage. From infancy until she was nineteen she had lived as monotonous a life as a young cabbage.

She had gone to the dame school in the village until she was fifteen, and had learnt to read, write, cipher and sew; more than this, she was a beautiful needlewoman, was fond of reading, and had a very sweet voice, which was heard in the choir on Sundays, but she could not play a note, draw a stroke, nor read a line of French.

She had no lucrative accomplishments. Moreover, she had no companions; the school-fellows were village-girls, daughters of the butcher, baker, and blacksmith, and "Aunt Jane"—as she called Miss Mee—sternly discouraged any intimacy. There were no walks, no tea-drinkings and blackberry-pickings for Linda May.

She stayed at home, read the daily paper to her aunt, helped to water and weed the garden, or went messages to the village, to save the shoe leather of old Nancy, the factotum of Mona Cottage.

"Aunt Jane" was prim, narrow-minded, and strict, and kept Linda in the order which was usual fifty years ago. She must not loiter or even lean back in a chair; she must not cross her feet or put her elbows on the table; she must not ask questions and give answers. She must be silent, obedient, industrious, and, in short, a model girl—and Linda was all this, having been scrupulously trained in the way she should go, from her infancy upwards.

As she grew on in her teens she outgrew the mild (?) rule of passive obedience; she began to be inquisitive. And on her fourteenth



birthday she broke into open revolt, and in reply to "Don't ask questions," boldly said,—

"I must, and will know who I am—where I came from, Aunt Jane? It is cruel of you to keep me in ignorance—it is time I knew!"

"Ignorance is best in your case," said Aunt Jane, frowning over her spectacles, and laying down her knitting.

"Why?" she asked, brusquely.

"Ah! if I told you *why* you would know all."

"And why may I not know all?"

"You may some day; you are too young now."

"At least, are my father and mother alive?"

"No; they are both dead years ago."

"And have I no relations?"

"None that would care for you."

"Then you are nothing to me?"

"Nothing."

"And why do you give me a home?"

"Partly for charity, partly because I am fond of you, partly because I receive five-and-twenty pounds a year for your board and lodging."

"And when I am grown up what is to become of me. Am I always to live here?"

"Yes."

Linda sighed wearily, and the old woman said,—

"Why do you sigh? You have a very good home, you have not to earn your bread, you have plenty of wholesome food and warm clothes, you are educated!"

"Yes, educated, but I feel very ignorant. I am a common village girl; I wear coarse dresses, and thick shoes, and sit next the blacksmith's daughter in class; but you would allow me to walk home with her, or take tea with her. Why is that? Am I—am I—as Nancy once told me—a lady?"

Dead silence for a moment, and then Miss Moe burst out passionately,—

"Nancy is an old fool!"

"Then what am I?" persisted the girl.

"A most unfortunate, friendless creature, without kith or kin or fortune, that must keep herself very quiet, and just creep through the world without attracting anyone's notice. There! now don't ask me any more questions till you are twenty years of age. It's a nice thing to have a bit of fifteen cross-questioning her betters!"

Nancy, the old servant, was not so secretive, especially after she had been down to the village and brought up a bottle of gin under her apron.

On some occasions—rare, we must admit—Linda had come into the kitchen and found Nancy rocking herself to and fro, and complaining of "a weakness in her legs." And certainly there was an incoherency about her speech, and a wildness in her eye, that innocent Linda attributed to keen physical pain, and was so kind and sympathetic that once or twice Nancy had snatched her to her bosom and uttered strange, rambling sentences such as, "I know more than they they think, close as they are. My darling girl, you will have your rights yet. You're a real lady, all out. Sure Miss Moe was only the ladies' maid. I am not saying a word against her, and she is as fond of you as if you were her own, though she is so—so—"

Here Nancy would let her head fall suddenly forward, and drop off to sleep with startling abruptness.

It was only during these attacks of illness that she was so communicative. At other times she withdrew every statement with angry vehemence, and declared that Miss Lindy was *dreaming*.

As years rolled by Linda became more independent, and from being treated as an infant took rather a lead in the establishment. She scraped acquaintance with the Rectory young ladies through the parish library and Sunday-school.

The Miss Wilsons were rather pleased to

patronize the village beauty—for she was a beauty—and had her up to tea at the Rectory, when there was no one at home but themselves; lent her books and patterns of fancy work, and retailed to her amazed and eager ears tales and anecdotes of the great world—a world of tennis parties, country dinners, pic-nics, and children's treats.

Between themselves they had often wondered about Miss Moe's niece. Miss Moe herself was, a prim, respectable, retiring person, who had a neat cottage, a pretty garden, and a pew in church; but who, for all her primness and reserve, could not conceal the fact that she was not a lady.

But her niece, Linda May, was like an eagle in a crow's nest, and looked, by her out and carriage, as if she had the blood of all the Howards in her veins. She was not Miss Moe's niece—she was not of the same type.

She had perfectly classical features, a skin like alabaster, and beautiful bronze-brown hair, so utterly different from the ordinary village belle—all flaxen locks, and milk-and-roses!

Then, in spite of her plain education and ordinary surroundings, she had all the ideas of a lady; and was even more refined and fastidious in some respects than they were; and her plain, ill-made dress no more disguised the grace of her figure than her clumsy village shoes and gloves concealed the smallness of her feet and hands.

Old Nancy, during one of her "attacks," had dropped hints that had spread through the village, that Miss Linda May was a lady—a real lady—and no one in the place was fit to wipe her shoes; but then, people knew old Nancy's weakness, and did not receive all she said as gospel truth.

Linda May was certainly a gentle-looking girl, but that was all, as far as looks went, and she had not a bit of pride about her, said the neighbours, and why should she? Treated one she was founding off a door-step.

One day in autumn, walking through a field, when the corn stood breast high on either side of the barrow-pathway, Linda met the two Miss Wilsons walking single file, and behind them a gentleman with a swarthy face and piercing black eyes. He stared at her in a manner that brought the blood to her face; and when she had passed on, she distinctly heard him say, in the thin autumn air—every word was audible,—

"What a lovely face! Who is she?"

"Oh! Only a girl in the village. Old Miss Moe's niece!" returned Miss Selina, in an off-hand way.

"A lovely face!"

Had she a lovely face? The idea was so new to her that she was obliged to sit down on the next stile, and think it over; and then, directly she reached home, she ascended to her own little whitewashed chamber under the eaves, and stared hard at the reflection in the glass.

What did she see? Brown eyes, soft as velvet, rippling, reddish brown hair, and a clear out—almost statuesque, set of features, and so this was beauty!

If she had beauty, why should she keep so quiet, and creep through the world as Aunt Jane had declared to be her duty?

The first seeds of vanity were sown, and grew apace—sown by the casual remark of the dark-faced stranger.

Linda saw his eyes fixed on her as she sat in the choir on Sunday, and felt a glow of half-guilty exultation.

At eighteen Linda May was an unsophisticated, simple-minded country girl; at eighteen Linda May was lovely, and very much amazed to glean the fact—the unexpected news—from the lips of a passing stranger.

After a heretofore uneventful life events now were crammed into a very short space in her existence. Old Nannie fell downstairs during one of her attacks, and was picked up stone-dead, having broken her neck.

The shock told upon old Miss Moe, and a series of colds weakened her hold upon life;

and, finally, a specially severe winter laid her on her death-bed.

A young girl had replaced Nancy in the kitchen, but Linda never suffered her to enter the sick-room, and took all the nursing upon herself, and attended the sinking patient with all the skill of a sick nurse, and the affection of a daughter.

One night, as she stood beside the bed before lying down on her own little couch, the old lady said, in a feeble voice,—

"Linda, you are near nineteen. It's time you knew. If I don't get over this I don't know what's to be done with you! I've left you my bit of money—the twenty-five pounds stopped two years ago. My will is wrote out by myself, and signed by Nancy and Tom the milkman, and you'll find it in the secretary downstairs with all my papers; and there's some letters concerning you, tied with a piece of yellow silk cord. However, I feel more lively-like to night. Where's Billy the cat? Put him up on the bed to keep my feet warm. You'll be good to him, Linda, and you'll stop on here; but I'm talking nonsense. I'll live many a year yet. Why, I'm only sixty-four, and my mother lived to a hundred. Thank the cat in his own place, and to-morrow morning I'll tell you what's been long boiling over in my mind. I'll tell you your own story, no matter what comes of it."

"Oh, will you, Aunt Jane? Will you, really?" said the girl, eagerly. "Could you not tell me some now?"

"No; not till to-morrow," shaking her esp as she spoke. "But you need not look too joyful, dear, for it's a bitter black tale you have to hear. There, give me my draught, and let me go to sleep. You shall have it all to-morrow morning."

All through the night Linda tossed and turned on her narrow couch. She was so restless and excited that she could not sleep. It was well to be Aunt Jane, who never stirred, and slept like a rock, but then Aunt Jane had not such an event before her as she had on the morrow. On the morrow all the mystery of her life would come to an end, and towards morning she fell into a doze, with this thought uppermost in her mind.

Then daylight came, and she rose and went to the bedside of her patient. The mystery of life was at an end for Jane Moe. No wonder she had lain so still, when she slept the sleep that knows no waking. There she lay—cold, stiff, and dead—with her favourite cat curled up beside her.

CHAPTER II.

THE news of Miss Moe's death spread far and wide over the village of Manister. A kind-hearted neighbour undertook to see after the last rites, and to look into Miss Moe's affairs, and see how Linda had been left. But this office was unexpectedly taken out of his hands by a clean-shaven, elderly man, with thin lips and a cruel grey eye, and a disagreeable manner, who arrived on the second day, and announced that he was a publican from Liverpool, and Jane Moe's brother and heir-at-law. He arrived late at night, but before he retired he cut down the funeral expenses, and ate an extraordinarily large supper. He treated Linda as if she were a servant, and the servant as if she were a worm.

The morning after the funeral he asked for his sister's keys, and looking himself in the sitting-room, proceeded to ransack the secretary. He turned it out most methodically, and came upon receipts for jam, hair wash, and the cure of chilblains, receipted bills, a packet of letters with a yellow string that was in some foreign language, finally the will, beginning,—

"I, Janet or Jane Moe, being in full possession of my faculties"—and then she went on to leave all her savings, her cottage and furniture, and clothes to her dear adopted niece Linda May, to be held in trust for her

until she was twenty years of age, by her dear brother, Thomas Mee, of the "Corkscrew and Fiddle," Everton, Liverpool, and begged he would accept the sum of five-and-twenty pounds for his trouble.

"I'll accept a good deal more; of that you may take your Davie, Jane," he muttered, as he came to the end of the page. "It's the will of a dotting old mad woman, and not worth the paper it's written on. Nine hundred pounds and the lease and furniture is no blind nut, and may come in very handy to your affectionate brother Tom. The girl may have the clothes and a fiver, and jolly well off to get them. I'll take her to London, and turn her loose there to get her own living. I'm not going to have any mysterious strangers a living on me. Jane was a fool to take her, and I always expected she'd do this. However, I came prompt, and there's no harm done. What the mind don't know, Miss Linda May, the heart won't grieve for."

And he rose and poked the fire briskly, made a large cavity among the coals, and then dropped in the will, which blazed very nicely. Casting his eyes about they fell upon the packet of letters, and he seized them, saying—

"Can't make out the lingo." But then, he knowing what tales they might tell, "best be on the safe side," so he poked them down on the top of the will, and was rather impatient that they were such a long time in burning.

After this performance he opened the door and called loudly for lunch—"bread and cheese, and beer."

It was brought in by the girl, with rather a surly air, and laid on the table before him.

"Where's the other girl?" he asked.

"Miss May is upstairs."

"Miss! she's no more miss than you are! Tell her I want her, and look sharp about it." Presently Linda came down and entered the room timidly. She was not used to men, and this loud-voiced, imperative stranger cowed her.

"I've had a turn out of the things." Then he said, speaking with his mouth full, "there's no will!"

"No will!" she echoed. "Oh, but there must be! She said it was in the secretary."

"Oh! she said that, did she? And maybe she told you what was in it?" he asked, sarcastically.

"She did!"

"Well?"

"She left the cottage and some money to me."

"The dence she did! She was wandering—she could not mean it. I am her own brother—the heir-at-law. There's no will—not a line. I come in for every shilling and every stick."

"And what am I to do?"

"You? Oh, you may have her clothes. I suppose you have no friends; you're nobody's child?"

"There were letters about me," she said.

"Letters tied with a piece of yellow silk—did you see them?"

"I? Where would I see them, my good girl?"

"In the secretary—may I look?"

"Oh, look as long as you like."

Linda hunted the secretary over, first eagerly, then very carefully, then hopelessly; and Mr. Mee lit a pipe, and looked on at the search with the utmost nonchalance.

When she desisted, the girl suddenly placed her hands before her face and burst into tears.

"Well, well, what's up now?" he asked, frostily. "What on earth is the matter with you, eh?"

"Oh, Mr. Mee, are you sure that you did not see her letters?" she said, taking her hands from her face, and looking at him piteously.

"Sure and certain."

"Then they are lost; and I shall never know who I am!"

"What trash and nonsense!" he exclaimed.

"Why I can tell you who you are sleep off."

"Oh! can you?" she ejaculated.

"Yes, you're an uncommonly smart, up-standing girl, with a neat figure-head, and I could get you a place as barmaid to-morrow."

"Barmaid!" she echoed.

"Well, you must earn the bread to put in your pretty little mouth," he said, with a coarse laugh; "and you won't earn it pleasant."

"I'd rather pick rags."

"Oh, you need not come to that; you are sure, with your ways and airs, to get some nice berth in some family. I'll give you Jane's old clothes and five pounds to start you, and you can't say I did not come down handsome, considering you are a stranger, eh? Yes, and I'll throw your ticket to London into the bargain! What do you say?"

"I say no," said the girl, plucking up spirits and looking at him with a glance of passion in her dark eyes. "I shall stay here; I shall find employment here. I have friends in Manister."

"There is no opening in this bit of a place for a girl like you. When I talked of a barmaid's place I was only joking; we shall get you a comfortable home in some grand family as companion to a lady. How would you like that?"

"I cannot tell; I know so little; I am not experienced or educated."

"Fiddlestick!" he interrupted; "you can read aloud; you write a first-class hand. I suppose you can sew, eh?"

"Yes, I am a good needlewoman."

"Well, then, there you are. You have only to be pleasant, and flattering, and run messages and look pretty, and you'll find a home with some nice old lady, and maybe she'll leave you a fortune!"

Linda was not mercenary, and knew very little of the value of money, and she did not believe in being left fortunes after her recent experience. Nor was she tempted by Mr. Mee's alluring picture of an easy, lazy life. Until now it had never occurred to her that she would have to work for her bread and trust entirely to her own resources, and she felt both helpless and bewildered.

Visions of existence in Moss Cottage, with the cats and Sara for company, teas at the Rectory, liberty to go and come, and speak to who she pleased; finally, comfortable old maidism, and a repetition of Aunt Jane's respectable existence had been the programme that had flashed across her mind. But now this strange, imperious, long-tongued man had come to cast her from the nest and bid her try her own wings and fly away into the world. No, not into the world; she would stay at Manister.

"I shall remain here, where I have friends," she stated, with decision.

"And live on them! Wait till you see how long that will last," he returned, with a scoffing laugh. "You don't know the world, my dear. Once your friends find you haven't a penny they won't be running after you and offering you a home; and I must shut up this place and put it in the market as soon as we have had the auction."

"And what is to become of the cats?" she asked.

"The cats? Drown them."

"Oh, no! I will get them homes, at any rate. Mrs. Tate at the High Farm will take one."

"And maybe she'd take you too, eh? Anyhow, you might go out this afternoon and look round and see what people advise. You can tell 'em that I am willing to take you away and start you in London in a comfortable place, where you will be treated as a lady, and that I'll rig you out and give you money in your pocket as well."

That same afternoon Linda May put on her hat and walked over to the High Farm. She had not a doubt in her mind as to what Mrs. Hughes would say. She was always against gadding, had never been out of Manister in her life. She would say, "Stay, and we will find you something to do." But to Linda's amaze-

ment Mrs. Hughes's face became very long as she related her story.

"No will, you say, and never left you a brass farthing! Well, well, well! I could not have believed it of Jane Mee; but the brother seems inclined to do the thing handsomely, and provide for you in a way—"

"Yes, but I don't like him, Mrs. Hughes. I don't like his rough manner, nor his eyes and voice."

"You can't think of them things when you got your bread to earn. Take my advice and take his offer."

"Take it?"

"Yes. Bob and I would be glad to have you here for a spell—say a month—but you know we have our own to look after, and at the end of the month you would be no forwarder, and there's nothing for you to do. You would not care about dressmaking, and, indeed, you look above it, for I don't know who you are or where you have come from, but you have none of Jane Mee's blood in your veins. You're a born lady, and best take a good chance, and maybe get back among your own sort."

Mr. Hughes, however, would give the cat a good home. He was a famous mouser, and could earn his living.

Mrs. Hughes's verdict was echoed with variations by all the community except the Miss Wilsons, who happened to be away.

It was unanimously decided that Linda May was to go and make a start for herself in London. What in the world would keep her at Manister?

And Mr. Mee, who had been making acquaintances at the public-house, the "Rose and Crown," had spoken in a very handsome and sensible way. Linda May was always shy and too much kept under; she did not know what was good for her.

The upshot of all this was that two days after her conversation with Mr. Mee Linda found herself at the railway station en route to London. Her two boxes were crammed with Aunt Jane's wardrobe. She had a huge bunch of wild flowers in her hand—a parting gift from Rosie, the blacksmith's daughter—and various pin cushions and needle-books and markers were packed away, offerings from her schoolfellows. Also a handsome prayer book, the gift of the two Miss Wilsons; and with this equipment, and with many tears and parting kisses, Linda May's little bark was pushed out of harbour to take its chance upon the great ocean of life.

CHAPTER III.

Linda's "guardian," as he dubbed himself, took her to a dingy lodging over a china shop near the Edgware road, and then set resolutely to work to find her something to do.

So active was he that at the end of three days he procured her the situation of governess in the family of a man in his own line of business, who had a "country place," as he was pleased to call it, out beyond Battersea-park. To this country place Linda was introduced by her guardian, and duly deposited in the hall, with her two boxes.

She found it a small, pretentious villa, all gables and corners, and with but little room. The mistress was as pretentious as the house—but she was by no means small, being on an unusually large scale. Her company voice was an affected drawl, but her everyday manner was a bullying, sharp air, acquired among barmen and backward clients, at the "Blue Cow," in "the business in the city," as she now mendaciously called it.

Mrs. Hogg had been a handsome barmaid in her day, and still considered that day at its zenith. She had ruddy cheeks, coal-black hair, worn in an enormous fringe; sharp, coal-black eyes, with a spark of fire in them. She was very fat, and was dressed in what she was pleased to term a tea-gown of salmon-coloured cashmere, and her podgy fingers were covered with imitation diamond rings.

"So this is the young person?" she said, haughtily. "Sit down—pray—Miss—ah—Miss Mee."

"May," corrected Linda's companion.

"Oh—May. How old are you?"

"Nearly nineteen."

"Any experience?"

"No," replied Mr. Mee. "She's not been brought up to earn her living, and she is too modest to speak up for herself. She is a splendid needlewoman, and can write and cipher like any clerk."

"And music?"

"No music, except singing. Instrumental music is going out of fashion among the upper classes, as you may know, Mrs. Hogg!"

"That's true," she replied, nodding her head. "And references, Mr. Mee?"

"I am her reference," he answered, with dignity. "Your husband won't ask more than that, and if every young woman had as good a one she might be proud."

"Ah! Well and terms? I can't say more than fifteen pounds a year to begin with; the children are small, and only three of them; and Miss May will have a luxurious home," looking round the apartment with much complacency.

"Fifteen pounds for the first year and washing," said Mr. Mee. "And let me tell you, Mrs. Hogg, that you are getting a dead bargain, and so she was. 'I am off to-night for Liverpool, so Miss May will, as arranged, come at once.'"

After a little conversation Mr. Mee took leave, and beckoning to his protégée to accompany him into the hall, said,—

"Now you've got a first-class start. Here is five pounds for you; save it up, and when you are rich and prosperous, don't forget that it was Thomas Mee gave you your first lift. Good-bye!" and wringing her hand, he seized his umbrella and was out of the hall before she could frame any reply.

"Chandos House," despite its high-sounding name, was a thin-walled, cheap little villa—and everything within it was on a thin, cheap scale, except its mistress. She lounged in a tea-gown, with her fringe in curl papers in what she called her boudoir; whilst Linda found that she had not only to teach these dull, unruly imps to read and write, but also had to wash, dress, and take them out for a walk and keep them in charge all day long, unless Mrs. Hogg wanted her hair "done," a dress altered, or a letter written.

At first Mrs. Hogg was charmed with her prize; she was so quiet, so industrious, so useful, and looked so genteel walking out with her children—and it was such a grand thing to crow over Mrs. Smith, and talk of her "governess." In these days she took Linda into her confidence, and told her of all her conquests before she met Mr. Hogg, of the presents she had refused, and the lords who had been at her feet!

But after two months of hard work—for her daily tasks seemed unlimited—from teaching to cooking, from cooking to hair-dressing, and letter-writing. She never had a second she could call her own, but all this was bearable whilst Mrs. Hogg was pleasant; but when she became sharp, overbearing and cutting in her remarks, the position was by no means agreeable.

Linda was at a loss to guess why she was treated in this way. The truth was, that Mr. Hogg and a friend of his, a red-faced commercial traveller, had spoken of Miss May the governess before Mrs. Hogg in terms of the warmest eulogium. "What a figure! What eyes! What hair!" Mr. Hogg and his friend had never seen anything like it!

Vainly Mrs. Hogg sniffed and fumed, and said Miss May was a pasty-faced slip of a girl, with no more style than a lamp-post.

The two men, who had had a good deal of whiskey and water, were boisterously unanimous. "Miss May was a beauty! a clipper!"

Poor Miss May upstairs little knew what days of misery this verdict cost her. Some-

how or other she never did anything right afterwards, never could please; she was worked like a galley slave, and loaded with abuse.

At last the worm turned. "Why," she asked herself, "should she remain here any longer? It was worse than being in prison, and her life was miserable. She had five pounds in her pocket—Mrs. Hogg owed her three—she would return to her lodgings over the china shop, advertise, and try her luck once more. She was qualified as a nursery governess, ladies' maid, and cook."

So the next time Mrs. Hogg was exceptionally harassing, and called her unhappy dependent "an ugly, red-headed fool—not worth her salt!" the ugly, red-headed fool plucked up sufficient spirit to answer her, and say,—

"In that case, Mrs. Hogg, you will be glad to get someone who is worth their salt, and I'll go, if you please, this day month?"

But long before that she was gone. Mrs. Hogg was a woman of ungovernable temper. She was determined to make it "hot" for Miss May as long as she stayed. Miss May once discovered that she, too, had a temper, and a fiery one when upset. She told Mrs. Hogg one or two very plain truths, had her ears boxed, and found herself and her trunks turned out of the house in half-an-hour's time—no character, no wages!

By the advice of her landlady, Linda applied for her money to Mr. Hogg, at his place of business and got it; but a character was beyond hope. Her very name had the effect of sending Mrs. Hogg into a furious passion, and beyond giving her his one, Mr. Hogg could do nothing whatever.

For a few weeks Linda lived very carefully on her capital, trying advertisement after advertisement in vain. "Where had she been lost? What were her accomplishments? Who could recommend her?"

She wrote an appeal to Mr. Mee—who had just sold Mona Cottage for a round sum—but he said to himself, "If I encourage this girl she will be a millstone round my neck all my life," and, accordingly, he wrote back a short note, saying that he had placed her in a very comfortable home, and done all he could for her, and washed his hands of her for the future.

She then stooped her pride to write to Mrs. Hughes, and Mrs. Hughes sent her a post-office order for five shillings, and advised her to take in plain work. Next she tried Miss Wilsons—her letter was returned. They were abroad, and the Rectory was in their hands.

Wherever she looked the door seemed shut in her face. She became poorer and poorer; she gradually pawned the most of Miss Mee's wardrobe. She now owed two weeks' rent, and five shillings to the grocer's at the corner. "What was to become of her?" she asked herself, as she cowered over the fire that melancholy Christmas-eve. She must either die of starvation or go into in workhouse! Of course it would be the workhouse.

As she sat thinking over the fire and wishing that she had never been born, she fell asleep and dreamed a dream. She seemed to see a fair face looking at her tenderly, and to her a soft voice sang, "Good days are coming soon." The remainder of her dream was very confused, and the only thing that dwelt upon her mind when she awoke was the remembrance of a beautiful face and the words, "Good days are coming soon."

The clock struck three on Christmas morning, when she awoke in the dark—cold, stiff and terribly cramped; and striking a match she lit her very last candle, undressed, and crept into bed.

Before she was up there was a knock at her door, and her landlady—a sharp, but by no means bad-hearted, little woman—entered.

"It's near nine o'clock," she said, "and I did not hear you stirring. I just came up with a nice cup of hot coffee, and to wish you a merry Christmas."

Merry Christmas, indeed! What a hollow mockery! However, Linda thankfully accepted the steaming coffee. Perhaps this was an earnest of better times. And it really proved to be the case; for in turning over Miss Mee's effects for the twentieth time, to see what she could pawn next, she came upon an old workbox, in the bottom of which was an ancient needle-book.

Linda opened this half in hopes of finding a needle or two, and out fell a piece of carefully folded paper. She took it up and spread it out before her with trembling fingers. She could hardly believe her senses. It was a Bank of England note for ten pounds, and in a pocket of this delightful needle-book were three sovereigns and half-a-crown!

What a change in her prospects that shabby little needle-book had effected! Linda rushed downstairs, and, with hysterical joy, told her story to Mrs. Todd—her landlady—and insisted on paying her rent then and there, and giving an order for some dinner on the spot.

"I'll tell you what it is, my dear," said Mrs. Todd, infected by Christmas jollity, the sovereign in her palm, and the girl's eager, worn, excited face, "I'll order no dinner for you at all—you shall dine with us. We have a goose, and a plum-pudding, and port and sherry wine, and oranges, and my cousin from the Edgware-road is coming. He is assistant in a fancy goods' shop, and they keep a registry. I'll introduce you, and tell him to book you for something good, and you pay your fee of half-a-crown."

"It's not much good, thank you, Mrs. Todd. I have no reference."

"Well, if I were you I'd have the law of that Mr. Hogg. However, I'll speak up for you if needed; and I'll tell you what, there's nothing speaks so striking for a person as their own appearance, you believe me! If you look shabby you'll be treated shabby. Lay out some of your money in a new bonnet, a pair of gloves, and a fur cape and boots. We will sponge up your best black dress, and you'll see you will be in a really grand place before you know where you are!"

"I am sure I hope so, Mrs. Todd; but not as a governess this time."

"No, ladies' companion. And I'll tell James to pick out some old party as keeps a good cook and a nice carriage!"

"A good cook and a nice carriage!" Linda echoed to herself, as she toiled upstairs. Hitherto Mrs. Todd had taken no interest in her weary searches for a place, and now she had asked her to dinner, and given her advice, and promised her assistance. Why? Was it because she had paid her rent, and because she owned what seemed to her quite a little fortune—twelve pounds and sixpence?

Linda had not much time to speculate, for the bells were ringing merry peals, summoning people to church, and she put on her shabby bonnet and set off. Her dream of last night seemed to be coming true; good times were dawning, and in the fulness of her heart and her thankfulness the shabby girl, with threadbare jacket and much-mended gloves, placed half-a-crown in the plate, to the intense amazement of the churchwarden who held it.

With Mrs. Todd's advice before her mind's eye she brushed up her best gown, sewed lace ruffles into the neck and sleeves, dressed her hair very carefully, and descended to the dinner-table with some trepidation.

Cousin John was a loud young man, with a shiny face, a frantic check suit, and the reputation of a wit. He was greatly impressed by this tall, rather silent, and uncommonly pretty girl.

She was not the least like any young woman he had ever met, and did not understand chaff and compliments. She was fresh—a complete novelty—and she won his respectful admiration before he had spent half-an-hour in her company, and he vowed to his cousin, Mrs. Todd, that she should have the very pick of the basket, in the shape of anything on his books, and she must be sure and

look in on him every day. This, he added, with a wink at his cousin.

"None of your nonsense, Jim—you wicked lady killer," said his relative artfully. "She is a friend of mine."

"And I am honoured to know her. You don't suppose I'd try any larks on with her? She is like one of the tip-top carriage folk that come after our best double rep note-paper."

In spite of a new and becoming bonnet, a neat fur cape, and a pair of four-shilling gloves, in spite of James Todd's partiality and interest, Linda made no progress, beyond a certain point. The rock that invariably wrecked her hopes was called "no references;" but at last, as she was hopelessly leaving the shop one day, an old lady, stout, agitated and breathless, hurried in headlong, and nearly fell over her. "Get me a chair, and water, and fan," she said, seizing on Linda. "I'm going off—it's a loose cow!"

As Linda carefully untied her bonnet strings, and picked up her muff, purse, and umbrella, and then fanned her, she explained, in short gasps, that she had left her carriage at the corner, as she wanted to look in at the shop windows, and that an awful cow or bullock had come flying along the street, and frightened every one most terribly, and she had been obliged to run for her life.

"My dear," she said to Linda, "I'm obliged to you. Just tie my bonnet and settle my fringe a bit, and make me look decent. I wish I had some one about me with as neat fingers as you have."

"I wish I was about you," said Linda; "that is, if you want any one like me. I am looking for a situation."

"As what?" glancing at her sharply over her glasses.

"Reader, and ladies' useful companion."

"And have you good references, my dear?"

"No, none!" colouring. "I have only been in one place, and I was sent away, or rather I gave warning, and was sent away."

"That does not sound promising, does it? But truth is best, and I like your face."

"I wish you would try me, if only for a week!" said Linda, amazed at her own hardihood; but it was the boldness of desperation, and her boldness carried the day.

"Come home with me now," said the impulsive old matron "Come back in my carriage, and tell me all about yourself, and we will see what Sir Thomas says to you; and before Linda could realize her position she was swept away by her patroness, hurried into a well-appointed roomy brougham, and being driven away to be inspected by Sir Thomas, whoever he might be!

(To be continued.)

INCIDENT IN A POET'S LIFE.—An English lady who knew the late Philip Bourke Marston, the poet, well, writes of his personal history as follows: "Philip's history was tragic enough. Blind from his youth, he was engaged when quite a young man to a very beautiful girl with whom he was madly in love. The time of their marriage was near. She was abroad with him and her parents. I do not know if she had been ill. I think not. Certain it is that the end came all in a moment. He was seeking her, and called. There was no answer; he groped round the room looking for her; he found her on the sofa, and put his hands down to her face; there was no answering laugh. She was dead. This is the story as it is always told. I believe it is the literal one. When time had softened this sorrow his sister was his great companion; she also died. Thus he lost the two best loved of his life. It seemed as if those he cared for most were doomed to die. His betrothed, his sister, his friend Rosetti (who does not remember the beautiful sonnet Rosetti wrote to him?), his brother-in-law, O'Shaughnessy, young Maddox Brown, whose letters attest how much Philip Marston was to him, all went. Now Philip, too, has gone.

"I DON'T CARE!"

—o—

"I don't care!" How many troubles
From these hateful words have sprung.
Far too often falls the sentence
From the lips of old and young.
How it lowers man's true standard!
How it hurries to despair!
Spleen, and spite, and hate are nourished
In that baleful "I don't care!"

Pauper, in thy wretched garret,
Did it ever bring thee gold?
Maiden, did it mend the quarrel
Which arose when love grew cold?
Sailor on the boundless ocean,
Would you ever danger dare
On a ship, however worthy,
With the captain "I don't care?"

Heart-crushed pilgrim on life's highway,
Did it ever bring thee balm?
Toiler roused by man's injustice,
Did it e'er thy spirit calm?
Christian reaching after heaven,
Did it ever lead to prayer?
Parent, did thy child's amendment
Ever follow "I don't care?"

"I don't care!" Oh! let the sentence
Never pass your lips again.
It can never bring you pleasure,
But it may engender pain.
'Mid all Satan's vile inventions,
None more surely can ensnare
Than the worthless, good-for-nothing,
Stupid saying, "I don't care!"

F. S. S.

JUDITH.

—o—

CHAPTER IV.

NEW ADMIRERS.

"Do you often have these dinner parties?"

"Twice, sometimes three times, a week."

Judith and Winifred had been decorating the dinner-table; and now, resting from their labours, sat in a couple of arm-chairs, admiring the result.

The effect was good, though simple in design, the commonest pink roses massed together with no other flowers, nor even their own leaves; but they looked very well in the pink glass bowls on the deeper shade of embossed pink velvet that ran along the centre of the table.

Judith was quite satisfied, and Winifred enthusiastic; declaring they had never had it so pretty before, appealing to her father to corroborate the assertion when presently he entered the room.

He agreed at once, praising their handiwork kindly; then fidgeted about, moving the muffineers, dusting the Dresden china candlesticks with his handkerchief, looking after the wine and dessert, evidently anxious that all should be *comme il faut*.

He was writing out the names of the expected guests on some little china stands when Winifred, who stood behind him gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Fourteen! Then you have asked someone in place of the Hares?"

"Your mother asked Captain Graeme last evening, and as we could not sit down thirteen, I thought I had better ask someone else; and as I met Johnson I thought I might as well ask him."

"And he is coming?" asked Winifred, her slow, cold tones contrasting with her father's hurried, even apologetic manner.

"Oh, yes, he said he'd come!"

"We may as well go, Judith; there is nothing more to do!" said the girl, quietly, only a slight dilating of her nostrils showing she was under the influence of some excitement.

Just as they were leaving Mrs. Sherston came in, and stood in front of the table, frowning as she surveyed it.

"Oh! this will never do!" she said, in the hard, dictatorial voice Judith had begun to know so well and to cordially dislike.

"Why, I think it looks very nice," said her husband.

"Oh! nice! What has that to do with it? I distinctly remember that last year, when we dined at the Trevors, she had nothing but nasturtiums in amber vases on old gold velvet! She'd say at once we had copied her idea!"

"I would not mind that so long as it looked pretty," said Judith; then bit her lips in anger at her own impulsiveness as Mrs. Sherston turned and looked her down coldly.

"It is excessively bad style to copy people in that way. I would not do such a thing for worlds."

"If we put a little mignonette amongst it, will that do?" asked Winifred, who was beginning to look very tired.

After some discussion Mrs. Sherston consented to be mollified by the addition of the mignonette and some rose leaves, at the last moment putting in a pink geranium here and there; while Judith looked on in silence, tacitly refusing to help.

"There, that looks much nicer! The leaves tone it down, and are a great relief. It was too pink before," said the lady, complacently. "Do not you agree with me, Miss Holt?" she added, as no one replied.

"If I had thought so I should have done it like that at first!" blurted out Judith rebelliously, while Winifred hastened to interpose, for fear her mother might take offence at her friend's outspokenness.

"But it is much nicer, of course, not to have appeared to be copying Mrs. Trevor."

She followed Judith from the room, and Mrs. Sherston's voice was quite audible to both as she said to her husband in her most aggravatingly superior manner,—

"She was afraid that poor girl had a most unfortunate temper!"

At this rather one-sided view of the case Judith was half inclined to laugh, but a feeling of anger dominated the impulse of merriment, and made her throw up her head proudly.

"I shall never take any trouble about anything again!" she declared.

"What does it matter?" asked Winifred, soothingly.

"But the table looks so horrid now, so commonplace! It was only the mass of colour made those roses look well at all!"

"What does it matter? If it had been left so it would have pleased the people who are coming to-night better, I daresay; but, after all what is it whether they are pleased or no? It is much better policy to keep mamma in a good temper."

"Nothing should have made her say I liked it!" vehemently.

"And I," declared Winifred, "would say anything for peace and quietness."

They separated then to dress for dinner.

On Judith's bed there lay a white gown she had selected on account of its coolness; but she tossed it back impatiently into a box, and drew out one of copper-coloured plush instead.

"I will wear something to impress her; she shall see I am not the raw schoolgirl she imagines me!" she said viciously to herself.

The gown was made quite plainly, and showed every line of the beautifully-moulded figure. It came up high on her shoulders, but left the neck and arms quite bare, with only some brilliantly cut beads outlining the opening—a fashion that anyone else might have found trying, but suited Judith's style exactly. The dark hair with its metallic gleams of light was coiled round and round her head, allowing the white parting to show in front as well as the soft natural fringe that shaded her brow.

She looked very lovely, very queenly, as she surveyed herself before going down; and with a little thrill of excusable vanity, told

herself that she need not fear even Mrs. Sherston's adverse criticism, nor the rivalry of any elderly married woman who by experience and art (not nature) had learnt to fascinate and compel the admiration which had probably been withheld from her in earlier life.

The smile which had parted her mobile lips was there still, as, emerging from her room, she encountered Mrs. Sherston.

She stopped and looked her daughter's companion up and down, her eyes fixed at once by the contrast of the dark rich plush against her white neck.

"You must excuse my saying, Miss Holt, that you have made the same mistake with your dress you made with the dinner-table just now. It is very nice, but wants relief. I am not saying it is not fashionable. I dare say it is, only good taste can often rectify the errors to which even the best dressmakers are liable. Run back to your room—there is plenty of time—and tack a piece of lace into the neck and sleeves of your dress, and I am sure it will look quite pretty!"

With crimson cheeks and lids that drooping hid the anger in her eyes, Judith went back, less with the idea of obeying the suggestion—which, indeed, was meant as a command,—than by going to avoid the danger of some defiant answer coming out that she might subsequently regret.

She was more irritated than the occasion would seem to demand, but had always prided herself on her taste in such matters, and felt also that in any case she had a right to please herself. It was insufferable that this woman, whose clothes were generally made by a native tailor on the verandah, should presume to criticise what was turned out by one of the first French artistes in town.

For a long time she wavered, half resolving to defy her, and go down as she was; and then a little reflection told her it would be very foolish to lose a really good situation for such an inadequate cause.

Mrs. Sherston liked her own way, and must have it in these small matters, even at the expense of a little hurt pride. It would never do to relinquish her scheme for helping her father, and have so slight a reason to urge for doing so—only that her hard-hearted employer had insisted on her wearing a piece of lace on a gown that she—Judith—considered looked best without it.

Her good humour restored at the folly of the idea, she searched for and found a wisp of old white Mechlin, and laid it lightly under the rows of glittering beads, rather reluctantly confessing to herself that the soft lace did, after all, look more womanly, and was also more becoming. Then she went to the drawing-room.

Some dozen people were assembled when she entered, and allies were turned upon her, even Mrs. Sherston admitting grudgingly that she was very fair to see; indeed, she looked absolutely brilliant in her rich gown, the traces of recent excitement still visible in her heightened colour, and the somewhat steely gleam of her blue eyes.

She came half-way across the room, then stopped, remembering that she knew no one there, and a swift glance having assured her that Mrs. Sherston was engaged talking to the General's wife, and would probably not wish to be interrupted.

Not in the least embarrassed, only slightly bored at finding herself amongst strangers, who might, possibly, be as little interested in her as she in them, she stood there in an attitude of careless grace, looking—so the men unanimously decided—immeasurably above the rest of the women present; a little conscious of her superiority, perhaps, but too well-bred to show it aggressively.

She started slightly at Mr. Sherston's voice behind her.

"Mr. Johnson is to have the pleasure of taking you into dinner, Miss Holt. May I introduce him?"

Turning, she confronted the man she had

seen a few days before, and liked him no better now than she had done then.

He was a man of ordinary height, well-dressed, and with manners she was compelled to admit were not amiss. It was his face she disliked.

It was very thin and sallow, and seemed out of keeping with his figure, which was inclined to stoutness. Moreover, it had a sinister expression, the eyes being set very close together on either side of the long, attenuated nose. It was probable in spite of his jet-black hair, which he wore rather long, as though proud of its luxuriance, he had already passed middle-age; but it was very evident that on this point he would prefer to deceive anyone he could.

Their glances met, and Judith fancied that the pupils of his eyes dilated, as though with some intense sensation; it might be an instinctive reciprocity of dislike. With the slightest and most chilling of bows she acknowledged the introduction, allowing him to talk to her, but responding in monosyllables, and taking so little interest in the subject of his remarks that she was free to notice one of the servants coming to say something to Mrs. Sherston in a low voice—something that evidently annoyed and caused her, with a hurried apology to the lady to whom she had been talking, to rise and leave the room.

After a few moments' absence she returned, and in her usual shrill tones which penetrated to the farthest corner, observed that her daughter was too indisposed to join them; and at the same moment dinner was announced.

Only touching Mr. Johnson's coat-sleeve with her finger-tips, Judith allowed herself to be led in, but deliberately turned her face from him directly they sat down to table. She found her other neighbour very ready to engage her in conversation. He was quite a boy, with an eager way of talking that amused her, and before long she was in possession of nearly every detail of his existence. His name was Manleverer, he had joined the—th Lancers a year and a half ago, and he thought Mrs. Trevor one of the most charming women he had ever met.

"That is Mrs. Trevor," he explained, nodding towards the far end of the table where a small, fair, faded-looking woman, in not very pale blue gowns, sat and conversed in a vivacious manner with the two gentlemen on either side of her.

"Oh!" ejaculated Judith, and could think of nothing else to say.

"Who is that stout gentleman beside her?" she asked, presently.

"That is the great Colonel Lea-Creagh. He's Colonel of our regiment—the cavalry, you know, and something of a character. He's awfully fond of pretty women—married women, I mean; he's afraid to go near the single ones for fear they'd marry him. He's a capital good match, you know."

The last remark was added when Judith shuddered at the idea.

"It would take a very great deal of gold to gild him, I should think," she said, disdainfully, at which young Manleverer was immeasurably amused, all the more so because Mrs. Trevor was looking very sweetly into the eyes of the gentleman in question at that moment, while sideways, with an expression of fatuous admiration on his plain, uninteresting countenance, he returned her gaze with ardour.

"He's a very great ladies' man, I assure you. You see he's got lots of money, and entertains a good deal, and gives very handsome presents, and, really, he's not a bad old soul taking him altogether," with a spurious burst of generosity.

Then a subject was started which soon became general; and Judith, who was accustomed to society and could talk very brilliantly when she chose, kept the conversation in her own hands while eliciting much that was amusing from others who, without

such a stimulus, might not have troubled to exert themselves.

At the farther end of the table where Mrs. Sherston was there were frequent silences, people straining their ears to hear the clear voice with its piquant sayings that were at once so original and yet so ingeniously spoken.

Only Mrs. Trevor still strove diligently to arrest the attention of the two nearest to her. With Colonel Lea-Creagh she was partially successful; but the other scarcely attempted to disguise that his interest was elsewhere.

When Judith first entered he had pronounced her in his thoughts the most beautiful woman he had ever seen, and now his gaze was rivetted upon her as she leaned forward talking eagerly, her whole face aglow with animation, and the light of the big crimson-shaded lamp falling athwart her eyes making them look very large and luminous.

He had seen her once before, but then the wonderful eyes were closed and her face quite pale. He wondered if she would ever know how he had carried her through the crowd, her small head lying on his shoulder quite inert, her breath fanning his cheek—he could almost feel it now, and with a quick catching of his own breath, wished the chance might come again of doing her some small service.

Mrs. Sherston addressed him, and he fell to earth again with a start, remembering many things all at once, and realising one hard fact with a sharp pang.

"We were so very disappointed the Hares could not be here to-night," his hostess was saying sweetly; and knowing perfectly well why this remark was made to him and to no other, he was yet too distrustful to turn it off as easily as he could otherwise have done, and replied that he was sorry too, with a sudden earnestness of intonation that may have misled those who heard him; though, in fact, his thoughts were very far away from the lady they discussed. Then he plunged into conversation with Mrs. Trevor, who met him quite half way, and Judith's voice being no longer audible, his attention was not again distracted.

Mr. Johnson had bided his time quietly. Having a reason for wishing to speak to his beautiful companion—he was yet able to wait with patience till her conscience should prick her for her rudeness towards him, and she should wish to atone.

Women he well knew always repented the injuries they inflicted, more especially when these were received with dignity, and without complaint.

When her fan slipped off her lap on to the floor he picked it up, but without comment; and then it was the thought struck her that she had been impolite, and that without provocation, the poor man beside her being in no way accountable for her wayward likes and dislikes.

"Thank you very much," she said, sweetly. "A fan is getting less of a necessity than it was a week ago."

"You are just out from England, of course?" "That is quite true; but why do you say 'of course'?"

"The fact must be apparent to anyone—to the least observant. Look round the table, and then into the first mirror you come across, and you will see what I mean!"

The coarseness of the flattery disgusted her, and she half-turned to Mr. Manleverer; but the General's wife had accosted him at the same moment, and prudence compelled him to appear interested in the subject she had started.

Mr. Johnson saw his advantage and pursued it.

"Yes. You have just come from England, I am sure, and from London itself I should fancy; and in Paris you have also resided. Is it not so?"

The man's eyes were fixed upon her face.

with a look of cunning beneath his expression of bold admiration.

Disliking him more and more Judith was, nevertheless, impressed with his perspicacity, for it was quite true she had spent the last winter in Paris, and had been there several times before.

"How do you know that?" she asked, curiously. "Have you ever met me before?"

"I cannot claim that honour. I am cosmopolitan, and know something of the little characteristic gestures and mannerisms of most countries. It could not escape my notice that you possessed all the dignity, the hauteur, of an Englishwoman, with French vivacity and grace. Pardon me if I have offended!" he added, quickly, as her lips curled scornfully; and again she turned away.

She felt lowered in her own estimation, because he had dared to praise her; though her eyes were averted she knew his gaze was on her still, and felt out of all proportion angered at the notion.

At the same time there had been something in his expression which aroused her interest, and when suddenly she remembered the sentences she had overheard between him and Mr. Sherston, she addressed him of her own accord.

"Is this your first visit to India?"

"Oh, yes! Certainly! Why do you ask?" a shifty look in his eyes she noticed, but could not understand, for surely he could have no motive in shirking the question.

"And you have just come here?" she persisted.

"I arrived from Australia about a month ago!" he returned, deliberately. "Having spent a hot season there I now come to enjoy the pleasant cold of an Indian winter!"

"But surely it was winter when you left Australia?" she interrupted, directing a sharp glance at him to see if he showed any sign of having made a mistake.

"It was getting warm then, and I detest heat," he said, calmly.

Mrs. Sherston made the signal to rise, and Mr. Johnson was first at the door, looking straight into Judith's eyes as she passed; and she thought he pressed her fingers very slightly as he gave her back the fan he still held.

Furious at the fancied impertinence, she crossed the room, her head erect, and sat a little way apart from the other ladies who had gathered round the empty grate near the fireplace, nursing her indignation in solitude.

Presently Mrs. Trevor joined her, urged to do so probably by the notion that it is best to spy out the country of the enemy, and so become aware of its strength and weaknesses. Such a girl might be a very disturbing element in their society if she chose. The question was, did she know it? A glance might have sufficed to answer this to her own dissatisfaction. No one looking at Judith in her present mood could doubt that she was conscious of her powers, and would use them ruthlessly if the fancy seized her. Yet little Mrs. Trevor was not daunted.

"How do you like what you have seen of India, Miss Holt?" she asked, pleasantly.

"I like the country now, though I dare say I should not care for hot weather. It is the natives I cannot like."

"What, even here?" with eyes brows delicately upraised. "I thought they always showed to good advantage in the sacred precincts of a Commissioner's house."

"They are civil enough outwardly; it is a sort of repressed veiled insolence I object to, but perhaps I am rather a despot in my views. Mr. Sherston believes in equality. I argue it is impossible unless we are content to sink to their level; they could never—no, not with all the education and civilization in the world—rise to ours."

Mrs. Trevor looked at the girl critically. It was such a strange subject for her to take so evidently to heart, and she must have noticed so much during the few days she had been here.

"Mr. Sherston is a follower of Lord Ripon,

a firm believer in the wrongs and merits of the oppressed Hindoo."

Judith's eyes flashed fire.

"You must have read those columns in the *Indian Telegraph* headed 'Opinions of the Native Press.' They make me very wrath. The Government should not allow such—such sedition!"

Mrs. Trevor yawned slightly, and looked at the clock. A moment later, in answer to her unspoken prayer, the door of the dining-room opened, and her face brightened as Colonel Lea-Creagh and Mr. Johnson approached.

"We are discussing India," she explained.

"Ah! At present that is an interesting subject to Miss Holt; but she will weary of it terribly before long," declared Mr. Johnson.

"That is a globe-trotter's view of the matter. They are content with a cursory glance round," said Colonel Lea-Creagh, looking first at Mrs. Trevor, then at Judith, his eyes expressing utmost admiration, his full lips wreathed in a fascinating smile.

Two seats were vacant, one near the married woman, one beside the girl, and for a moment he hesitated which to take; then an uncontrollable impulse smothered prudence, and for the first time for many years he actually courted what he would have called destruction.

He sat down beside Judith, a soft fold of her gown brushed against his knee; and he was as utterly lost as though he had never railed against matrimony, never vowed enmity against it.

"I think one can see a great deal in a week," said Judith, happily unconscious of the conquest she had made.

"I agree with Miss Holt," said Johnson. "I have been in India only a month, and already I have found out that some have secured to themselves all the good things the country can afford, while others seem to experience only the ill! For ladies, the place has undoubted advantages; for the middle classes here can, if they choose, be as frivolous and as wicked as the upper ten in England!"

Judith frowned at the cynicism of the speech, and Mrs. Trevor, whom the sarcasm more nearly concerned, looked up quickly.

"Was it you by any chance who wrote an article on Anglo-Indian ladies lately?"

"I have been guilty of no such temerity," he replied.

"It seemed rather like your sentiments. The writer said we were much maligned, that we really had broader views than our sisters in England, that we were generally more pleasant, more interesting, because of our nearer knowledge of the mysteries of life and death! Oh, yes! we were good enough, kind enough, when kindness was required; but, with tragic emphasis, 'the Mrs. Langtry of India was forty, and oh! we were so plain!'"

Everyone laughed, as much at the speaker's evident horror at the accusation as at the quoted sentiments. At the same moment Mr. Sherston joined them.

He laid his hand on Johnson's shoulder with a rather nervous gesture.

"I am trying to persuade Mr. Johnson to stay with us for a month or so, and see the country about here thoroughly," he said, speaking to them all generally, so that for a moment no one being actually addressed there was no reply.

Happening to look up Judith saw such a mocking smile on the man's face that she shivered and grew cold with an unaccountable chill.

It was such a smile as Mephistopheles might have worn when first sure of his victim, she thought, and then was inclined to be amused at her own fanciful idea.

The man had an unpleasant cast of countenance, and found it difficult to assume an expression of mere friendliness or gratitude.

"Are you very difficult to persuade?" smiled little Mrs. Trevor, at last.

"On the contrary, I am only too charmed

to accept the invitation," was the quiet reply; and fascinated into looking in his direction, Judith saw that his face wore now the proper look of well-bred pleasure.

It must have been a fancy that he looked so diabolical before, a trick played by her own imagination.

Mrs. Trevor was asked to sing, and as Colonel Lea-Creagh, with a backward, regretful glance, led her to the piano Mr. Manlever brought up someone he introduced as Captain St. Quentin. The next moment Judith found herself *tête-à-tête* with one of the handsomest men she had ever seen.

He had taken the empty chair beside her, but did not seem in a hurry to open the conversation; and she was equally mute, until presently a sudden thought struck her.

All the military men were in uniform, in deference to the General who was present; and she recognised at once the Lancer mess-dress uniform. She remembered, too, that the initials on the handkerchief she had found beneath her chin were L. St. Q., while her rescuer had been described as belonging to the English Cavalry.

"It was you who helped me the day that I arrived?" she spoke impulsively.

"I had that honour," he replied, with a low bow.

"I am so very glad to be able to thank you, and to return your handkerchief as well. I do not know what I should have done if you had not taken me out of that dreadful place!" raising her beautiful blue eyes to his, into whose bright depths he allowed his own to gaze for one brief moment before averting them hastily, as though conscious of a guilty action.

"It was a shame to leave you alone amongst that rabble!" he said, hastily.

"I daresay I should not have minded if I had not felt so strange, so new to everything. Mrs. Sherston was unable to meet me."

Captain St. Quentin was perfectly aware that the lady in question had had no actual engagement that evening, for he had made particular inquiries in his first indignation, and had heard of her being at the Club. But he liked Judith all the better for not complaining of the neglect she had received, and, after the manner of very young men, having discovered her to be possessed of one virtue, he was eager to credit her with every other.

"Do you know," he said, allowing his voice to sink into the impressive tone which he had hitherto reserved for one other, "I have looked out for you so often since that day. Where do you go in the afternoons?"

"Winifred and I drive out generally."

"Never to see the Polo?"

She shook her head.

"Winifred is too nervous for that. She turned quite pale when I suggested it once."

"But to the Club. That is the universal resort when it grows dusk."

"We have not been there yet," doubtfully.

"But you will go soon?" he persisted, such an unconscious accent of appeal in his voice, that she flushed and was silent, feeling a little alarmed at the rapid strides they were making in their acquaintanceship.

"You will want an opportunity of returning my handkerchief?" he reminded her, audaciously.

"I can send it to you."

"No! no! don't do that. It might be lost. Give it back into my own hand, please, for fear of its misarrying."

He smiled as he spoke, and she laughed too. It seemed as if they had known each other for years.

Judith felt nearly as annoyed as when Colonel Lea-Creagh recrossed the room, and once more took his place beside her.

St. Quentin moved away, and for the rest of the evening Judith had no relief from the ponderous compliments that at once assailed her.

The attempt was made to convey the fact that a great honour was being done to her by such pointed and unusual devotion; but to

this suggestion she remained absolutely blind and deaf; and was only conscious of a vexed rebellion against the chance that left her stranded thus in an otherwise empty corner of the room with so uninteresting a companion.

CHAPTER V.

CONFIDENCES.

So soon as the last guest departed, Judith rose to say good-night, leaving Mr. and Mrs. Sherston to discuss the success of their party.

When she turned up the lamp in her room Judith saw that the hands of her clock pointed to twelve, and she was debating whether to go to Winifred or not, when Winifred herself opened the door between their rooms, and called her to go in.

"I thought you would be asleep," said Judith, as she complied. "Are you better now?"

"Quite better. I did go to sleep, and the rest did me good. That was all I wanted, in fact."

"Then you were not very bad?"

Winifred smiled as she drew her friend towards the small fire that burned cheerily in the grate.

"No; not very bad. I had a headache, but not a worse one than I have often had before when I have sat out one of these interminable dinners!"

"Then why did not you make the effort this time? I think Mrs. Sherston was annoyed."

"Annoyed is not the word; *furious* expresses the state of her mind more correctly. She came in here, but fortunately I was prepared for that, and had got into bed (with all my clothes on). Had there been a few more minutes to spare, I believe she would have made me get up again!"

Judith had allowed herself to be pushed into an easy chair, and now a cup of hot soup was thrust into her hand.

"I had the fire lit here on purpose to have it ready for you. I am sure you are tired and bored to death, and I want to revive you a little, so you can tell me all about it."

She was seated in an opposite chair, looking very wide-awake after her sleep, a thin sandwich between her finger and thumb, at which by turns she bit daintily, or threw a morsel to Dandy, who was sitting up solemnly in front of her, waving his front paws vigorously in a pretty, pertinacious fashion he had proved by experience to be generally successful.

"The soup is delicious; just what I appreciate, and I will tell you as much as I can remember of what passed to-night; but first confide in me. I want to know why you would not come yourself?"

"Because—because. Well, if you wish to know the truth you were partly to blame for that. I really had a headache, and I had a reason for not wishing to go; but it was your spirit of independence fired me with emulation. I shall grow as rebellious as you soon!"

"I hope not. If I thought my example was doing you harm I would go away!" said Judith, quickly; then added, in a low voice, gazing sadly at the glowing logs of wood, her hands lying idly now in the lap of her red gown, "It is only because I have always been my own mistress that I have grown independent—unwomanly, perhaps. If I had had a mother I would have laid down my life to please her. Her slightest wish would have been my law. At least so I think!"

"You never knew your mother?"

"She died when I was a little child, but I have a picture of her. She must have been very lovely—very gentle and sweet!"

"And my mother!" began Winifred, bitterly; then stopped short, a feeling of loyalty forbidding her to pursue the subject. "Perhaps," she went on presently, "one is inclined to exaggerate the claims of filial re-

verence if one has never been called upon to fulfil them!"

"I daresay it is so," agreed Judith, gently.

"If," falteringly, "there is less love between my parents and myself than in most cases it is my own fault entirely. There is nothing lovable in me. No wonder they do not care!"

"You must not get any such morbid idea into your head. Some people are not demonstrative—never show the emotion that they feel. Of course they do feel it, being human beings not sticks—nor stones. And someday there will be someone who will love you more than any, and you will go away and have a home of your own, and be as rebellious," with a little tremulous laugh, for she was more moved than she wished to show by the girl's pathetic speech; "and as happy as you choose."

Winifred shook her head sorrowfully.

"Never, now!" she murmured; then, conscious of the other's inquiring glance, though she never raised her eyes, she went on, with an effort. "There was someone once—five years ago—who cared for me; but he was in the Native Infantry, and they thought—they thought he was not good enough, and so we gave each other up. Six months afterwards he was killed at polo. *I was there!*" covering her face, and shuddering from head to foot at the recollection.

All the warmth of Judith heart was on her lips and in her eyes, as swiftly traversing the short space between them she knelt down, and wound her arms round the poor girl, who seemed little more than a child, and so frail, yet had tasted such cruel sorrow.

She kissed and caressed her in silent sympathy, while Winifred was mute and tearless.

"It is all so long ago," she said, wearily at last. "And you must have been very young. You are very young now?"

"I am twenty-two," was the quiet response.

"You look seventeen!"

"That is because I am small and insignificant, and have no manner. I don't think I ever looked younger than I do now. Perhaps," with a wistful smile Judith did not comprehend, "I shall never look any older."

"To think that you are older than I!" cried Judith, the wonder being very natural, for her own figure was taller and more formed. Her face had more character, from which it might have been judged that she had gone through more experience to mature it, while she was always gracious, winsome, and at ease.

"You have the advantage over me in everything. Tell me, Judith, how many conquests have you made to-night?"

"Must I give you the truth?" roguishly.

"Of course. What else would you dare to offer me?" falling in with the gaiety of the other's mood.

"Then," starting to her feet and adopting the attitude of a commanding officer on parade, "prepare to receive—cavalry! A colonel of cavalry; almost as big a personage as your father, I suppose, with a kingly presence, a most speaking eye, and a waist as big as this!" making generous measurement with her arms.

"Not Colonel Lea-Creagh, surely?"

"The very same. He sat with me for nearly an hour. I don't believe I appreciated the honour then, but now that he has gone and can't come back, now I am beginning to feel proud and pleased!"

"Fancy him trusting himself with you! He is so afraid of being married, and you are so lovely, Judith, that I expect it was an unconditional surrender. Who else was there? I suppose you were not contented with one?"

"Is it likely? On the contrary, there were so many that I don't know who is worthiest to be named after Colonel Lea-Creagh."

"Then tell me who was there, and I will guess."

(To be continued.)

DULCE'S INHERITANCE.

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CHAPTER V.

It was quite settled. The Reverend Richard Bengough, vicar of West Highshire, and Hubert Clinton, Esq., lawyer, of the Inner Temple, the two executors of John Stone's will, and the guardian of his child, both declared themselves satisfied of Noel Bertram's identity, and the news spread like wildfire through Highshire that the new heir was coming on a visit to Stoneleigh to see the inheritance almost certain to become his own, and the young lady his benefactor had destined for his wife.

"Poor little Dulce!" said old Lady Raymond to her husband. "One hardly knows how to help her!"

But Lord Raymond, who cordially detested Frederic Dalton, felt himself obliged to approve the will which had rescued Dulce from her first lover.

"I don't see that she needs help at all. She has simply to make up her mind—if Mr. Bertram proposes to her—whether she will marry a man she knows to be honest, generous, and true. If she refuses she has five hundred a year. Quite enough to keep her in ease."

"But it must be such a trying position, actually to be shut up in the same house with a man, and know she is expected to marry him!"

"Nonsense. There are plenty of rooms at Stoneleigh. If she doesn't hit it off with the young fellow they can sit in different apartments; and really, Lucinda, a month will soon come to an end!"

That was the burden of all poor Dulce's friends, "a month will soon be over," and she tried to take comfort from the thought on the February evening, when she sat awaiting her introduction to the man whose name had been familiar to her for so many years.

Dulce had gained her wish.

Nina Dalton sat beside her in the beautiful drawing-room. She had yielded to Dulce's entreaties, and promised to remain at least a fortnight.

Then Mrs. Leslie, who, if not good at discriminating character, had yet a veritable genius for social arrangements, had suggested the more people present the less awkward would be the meeting, and therefore the Vicar and kind Dr. Drake had joined the party.

Mr. Clinton had at first proposed to accompany the expected heir, but sudden business had made him change his intentions.

"We shall be just six!" said Mrs. Leslie, fassily. "Of course, my dear Dulce, Mr. Bertram will take you into dinner!"

Dulce shook her head.

"He will take you, goody, as the lady paramount of Stoneleigh, and as the Vicar is to be your *vis-à-vis* he will take Nina. I shall fall to my dear Dr. Drake, and shall actually be as far removed as the size of the table permits from my *bête noir*."

"And I shall have him next me?" said Nina, with assumed alarm. "Well, Dulce, I will study him attentively, and report progress to you later."

Miss Dalton wore black to-night, in compliment to the deep mourning of her hostess—a soft, rich toilet of velvet, trimmed with a little rare lace. A bright, attractive-looking girl, though she had not the dainty loveliness of Dulce Stone. A good, true face, moreover, with a firm resolution in the smile, and something nobler in the broad, open forehead.

"If only Sir Frederic had been like his sister," thought poor Mrs. Leslie, "this evening's ordeal would have been spared us."

The carriage met Mr. Bertram at the station; but, by Dulce's desire, he was shown straight to his own rooms. A suite of three had been assigned him; refreshments were then awaiting him, and the butler offered him the intimation that dinner was at seven.

Ten minutes before the hour Dulce, and Miss

Dalton entered the drawing-room. Mrs. Leslie and the two elderly gentlemen were already there.

Dulce drew a sigh of relief.

"I am so glad he is not here!"

Dr. Drake alone heard the words.

"My dear," he said, kindly, "don't look so frightened. Remember this is your father's house, and you have your friends round you! Even if this young man proved other than we hope for he could not harm you!"

The door was thrown open. Mrs. Leslie rose. Her true hospitable instincts helped her through a moment that would have been embarrassing to many.

"Ah, Mr. Bertram!" she said, giving him her hand. "I hope we shall make you feel at home at Stoneleigh, as I daresay you have heard my name is Leslie, and I have lived with Mr. Stone almost ever since his return from abroad?"

She glossed over entirely the question of "being glad to see him," or his making a long stay. She had managed for truth and politeness to join hands in answer with perfect grace.

"You must let me introduce you to our friends," she went on. "Mr. Bengough, our Vicar, and Dr. Drake were both old school-fellows of Mr. Stone, and Miss Dalton is Dulce's most intimate friend."

He bowed low to Nina, and then put out her hand to the only one of the little party who had not been introduced to him.

"I little thought, seven years ago, Miss Stone, that I should ever meet you in your home. I looked on my chance meeting with your father as one of those rare romantic incidents which do sometimes illumine the greyest lives."

He spoke with the utmost deference; his voice was clear and distinct, his manner perfectly at ease. Had he never heard of John Stone's will and its remarkable conditions he could not have been more self-possessed.

Dulce felt somehow he was making her task easy for her, and thanked him in her heart as she went in to dinner on the doctor's arm.

If any of the five had expected Mr. Bertram to make any social blunders, or to evince by the faintest trifle that the daintily-arranged meal was such as he had never seen, they were disappointed.

Noel Bertram behaved as though he had been used to banquets of seven courses and the attendance of three men-servants from childhood. He was by far the most collected of the party. He led the conversation, touching on most of the topics of the day, and displaying a good amount of common sense and intelligence. He was most careful to avoid any reference to more personal matters. In short, he conducted himself as though he were an ordinary guest, and nothing more; while as to behaviour, he could not have played his part more admirably had he bought a shilling manual of etiquette and studied it for weeks, and probably, in that case, would not have behaved half so well, as the easy grace of his manners was certainly their charm. He held the door open for the ladies and then returned, hoping in his heart he should not be condemned for a very long period to the society of the two old men, as he considered the doctor and clergyman.

"Were you ever in Highshire before, Mr. Bertram?" asked Dr. Drake, who thought their knowledge of Noel Bertram's past life a trifle mesagre.

"Never. I know very little of England excepting a few large towns. I have lived chiefly in London since I came over in 'seventy."

"Are your parents living?" asked the Vicar, who scorned to use a subterfuge, and preferred coming to the point.

"I have not a relation in the world. My parents died when I was quite small, and I was that unlucky being, an only child. A godfather paid for my education, and got me into a French merchant's; but for the war I might have stayed there and worked my way

to fortune. As it is, I was thrown on my own resources at twenty, with neither money nor influence."

"And you went on the stage?"

"It seemed the only thing to do. The market for clerks was overstocked. I had no capital. At least it was honest, and had this to recommend it—*independence*. I did not need to sue anyone for help. I just did what I could, and received what the manager pleased."

"You don't speak enthusiastically?"

"It is a long time since I felt enthusiastic about anything, sir. I have sense enough to know I should never be a great actor; but it has provided me with a suitable existence while seeking a career better suited to me."

"Well, all that is over now. You'll never need to earn your own living; most likely you come into three millions of money. At the worst, you enjoy five hundred a year for life."

"It seems," put in the doctor, "a wonderful chance that brought you and Mr. Stone together!"

"A lucky chance, one may add," said the Vicar.

"For me undoubtedly," admitted Mr. Bertram; "but it seems a cruelly hard thing for Miss Stone. She must think me an interloper, and hate the very sound of my name."

"Dulce is not mercenary; she cares very little for wealth and position."

"But she may care for love?" said Noel Bertram, slowly; "and if so, surely she would like to take a fortune to the man to whom she gave her heart?"

"Well, it sounds a strange thing to say of a young girl, but I don't think she *does* care for love. She professes not to believe in it."

"She is very beautiful!"

"And charming as she is beautiful," said the Vicar, warmly. "If ever I marry you to her, Mr. Bertram, I shall think you a very lucky man."

They went to the drawing-room for coffee. Dulce poured it out, and Mr. Bertram contrived to take a chair beside her.

"I wonder," he said presently, in a low tone, quite drowned to the others by the rattle of the cups and saucers, "I wonder if you would think me very presumptuous, Miss Stone, if I asked you to let us be friends? My name can have no very pleasant sound in your ears, but we have, I think, two bonds of union. I respected and admired your father as I never did any other man, and I have not a relation in the world, which I think is exactly your case."

"Friends are better than relations," said Dulce, gently, "for we choose them for ourselves."

"Will you let me be your friend?" he asked, and his musical voice had a pleading in it she could not resist. "Will you try to trust me as he did, and to think of me as a sort of adopted brother?"

Then he did not want to marry her. Dulce drew a sigh of relief.

"I should like us to be friends?" she whispered. "It would have pleased him. Oh! Mr. Bertram, I wish you had come here in time to see him!"

"How could I?"

"He told me he had invited you; besides, I know he begged you to write to him when you came to England."

"When I came to England you were, I think, still in Spain. When you returned there was a great barrier to my seeking you out."

"What was it?"

"You were rich, and I was poor. How could I tell that a millionaire would care to be acquainted with a needy youth like myself? Besides, Miss Stone, I am intensely proud. I could not have made the first advance, and claimed Mr. Stone's kindness on the score of our brief intercourse in Paris."

That last was strictly true. He could not.

"We thought you had gone abroad?"

"There was some talk of it, but I failed at

the last moment to gain the post. Somehow, friendless men without money mostly do fail."

"I must have misunderstood Mr. Clinton. He said you had been to Pekin."

"Of course, but I was there so short a time it hardly counts. They wouldn't have anything to say to me in Pekin because I didn't happen to wear a pig-tail!"

"How very narrow-minded?"

"Wasn't it? I had to be content with the stage. I suppose they have told you, Miss Stone, I have been on the boards more than three years?"

Nina Dalton considered the *tête-à-tête* had lasted quite long enough, and, crossing the room, begged Dulce to play something.

"The Vicar has been looking longingly at the piano for ever so long."

Then as Dulce rose to comply with her request, she asked,—

"Are you fond of music, Mr. Bertram?"

"Very," said Noel, promptly, feeling strange, to say displeased, that his *tête-à-tête* was ended. "You sing, of course, Miss Dalton?"

"Yes, but I can hardly play at all, while Dulce has music in her very finger tips."

"That is not her real name, is it?"

"No, she is Gladys really. I believe they called her Dulce long ago, just because it meant sweet! Certainly the name is very appropriate."

"I can see you are a friend of hers?"

"A great friend."

"Then of course you must hate me?"

"It wouldn't be fair to do that. You could not foresee the will; it was not your fault."

"The more I see of her the more wonderful it seems," said the young man, speaking evidently from his heart. "A plain girl, an ordinary girl, might suffer cruelly from being an heiress, but surely no man who wooed and married Miss Stone could possibly do so from any motive but love!"

"Take care," said Nina archly. "I may betray you."

"No, you look trustworthy. Do you know I hated the very idea of coming here. I thought she would squint and wear blue spectacles, or else be strong-minded, and go in for woman's rights! I never was so surprised at anything in my life."

"I foresee the end of the romance. I can predict that Stoneleigh will not pass away from Dulce," said Miss Dalton, laughing; "that is, if you have the settling of it. I own I rather expected if you were free you might yield to her charms, but I never dreamed it would be such a sudden surrender!"

"Hush!" said Bertram, quickly. "She is going to sing!"

She sang a quaint old English ballad, and then, at the Vicar's request, plunged into that sad, sweet, love story, "Barbara Allen." To Nina's surprise, Mr. Bertram's face changed at the first sound of the old romance.

He grew white as death, and before the song was ended had turned away and taken up a book, a breach of good manners she could not have believed him capable of.

"Don't you like old songs?" asked Nina, when Dulce was coming away from the piano, and Noel, still pale and grave, had resumed his seat.

"I detest that song! I can't think how anyone can sing it. Ridiculous nonsense the words are!"

"And yet they have power to turn your face as white as stone," thought Nina to herself.

"I am pretty sure of one thing, my dear sir, though your talk is so disinterested, and you express such warm admiration of Dulce, there is a secret in your life, which, strange as it sounds, this song recalls!"

The party broke up early, and Nina was sitting by Dulce's fire brushing out her dark hair long before eleven o'clock.

Dulce was strangely silent; there seemed something on her mind.

"Well?" said Miss Dalton, suddenly. "Do tell me what you are thinking of? I assure

you, Dulce, I am dying to hear. Is he like what you expected?"

"Not in the least."

"Better or worse?"

Dulce hesitated.

"Can't you trust me?"

"More than anyone in the world; but, Nina, that's the perplexing part of it. I can't bring anything against Mr. Bertram. He is quite a gentleman; he has nice manners and talks beautifully, but—"

"I admit all that, Miss Dulce; go on."

"I don't like him."

"You never expected to, did you?"

"No; but I thought I should have some cause for my dislike. I imagined he would be ill-bred, or else too goody—a kind of prig, you know. I believed there would be nothing amusing or nice about him. Well, Nina, I confess he is one of the pleasantest men I ever met. His manners are charming, and I can't find a fault in him, but yet my feeling is just the same. I don't like him and I never shall!"

"Did you tell him so?"

"Hardly! Besides, Nina, this is the strangest part of it. I seemed to like him while I was talking to him. He asked me if, despite the strangeness of our meeting, I would not try to look on him as a friend—a kind of adopted brother."

"And you said no?"

Dulce blushed.

"I said yes. Then you asked me to sing. Nina, I can't explain it to you. I know you will only laugh!"

Nina put one arm round her fondly.

"My dear, I promise not to laugh. Can't you trust me, Dulce? What made you change your opinion of our fascinating guest?"

"It was while I was looking for my music. Nina, don't think me going mad. I seemed to see my father's face, and to hear his voice whisper in my ear 'Beware.' Nina, I know it must seem folly to you, but to me it was real and true."

"I quite believe it, dear; but remember Mr. Stone was quite wrapped up in this young man. Even if the spirits of those we love are permitted (and remember, Dulce, I can't own they are) to warn us of danger, Mr. Bertram would be the last person against whom your father would caution you."

"I don't think so."

"Dulce!"

"Well, you see," said Dulce, slowly, "father was very much fascinated by Mr. Bertram. I never knew him take such a fancy to anyone before, and I am quite sure that when dad knew him he must have been nice!"

Here she paused, as though waiting for Nina to say something, but her friend's eyes were fixed on the fire, and her explanation bent on making Dulce continue her explanation.

"Seven years is a long time," went on John Stone's darling, thoughtfully. "A man might change a great deal from nineteen to twenty-six. Don't you think if Mr. Bertram has altered and deteriorated, shall we say, from his old self, dad would be sorry he praised him so to me and tried to make me like him?"

Nina was more impressed than she chose to show. It was strange both she and Dulce should have at first felt favourably towards the new-comer, and then experienced this extraordinary return of their former distaste.

"I believe that is it," said Dulce, slowly.

"I think seven years of poverty have made Mr. Bertram quite a different person, and that my father knows it, and has been allowed to warn me against him?"

But this was more than Nina's common sense would admit, even from her friend.

"Dulce, I am quite sure you are morbidly superstitious on this point. You set out with a prejudice against Mr. Bertram, and you are angry with yourself that for a little while his attractive manner nearly conquered your aversion. That is the true explanation."

Dulce faced round on her with a question.

"Do you like him, Nina?"

"I thought him most agreeable," said Nina, vaguely.

But Miss Nina was not to be put off.

"Do you like him?" she persisted. "Did you feel as if you could trust him? as though his word was his bond, and he was the soul of honour?"

"Dulce, dear, be fair. Can any man be all that?"

"Yes," said Dulce, simply. "My father was that. Then the Vicar and dear old Dr. Drake, different as they are, blunt and plain-spoken as people might term them, you know every word I have said is true of them."

"Dulce," said Nina, slowly, "fate has thrown you with these noble-hearted men, whose special favourite you have been. It will be a little hard on your lovers if they are all to be judged by such a standard!"

"I shall never have any lovers," returned Dulce. "I mean to refuse Mr. Bertram, and then I shall be too poor to receive any more offers. Nina, I do so wish I could go away now! I hate the thought of a month in his company—it is terrible!"

"You seemed to find it very pleasant to-night?"

"That is just it. He seems to have a kind of spell over me. Nina," and she clung to her friend with a kind of choked sob, "he can't make me care for him against my will, can he?"

Miss Dalton knew there was such a thing as mesmerism, and for an instant she trembled at her friend's fears, but the next moment she was ready to laugh at their absurdity.

"Dulce! Dulce! you are getting quite silly on this point! Poor Mr. Bertram! What next will you accuse him of? Do remember, dear, he does not gain a penny piece by marrying you, and that the surest course for his own interest would be to persuade you to refuse him. You may not like the man, but you ought not to impute such views to him."

Dulce shivered.

"Don't be angry with me, Nina; I feel a little frightened."

"You are tired and overwrought. I shall wish you good-night, and leave you to your slumbers."

"Don't go!" pleaded Dulce. "Oh, Nina, couldn't you stay and sleep with me, I feel so frightened?"

"Of course I will stay, if you wish it. But, Dulce, there is nothing in the world to be alarmed at! You foolish child, surely you don't expect Mr. Bertram to spend the night in the corridor outside, and propose to you through the keyhole?"

"I don't know what I expect," confessed Dulce; "only I can't bear to think of being alone!"

Nina felt really anxious about her, but the blue eyes closed as soon as Dulce's head had touched the pillow, and in five minutes she was in a sound, refreshing sleep.

It was long before her friend could follow her example. It almost seemed as though Nina had succeeded to her fears, for thinking over the events of the evening a strange uneasiness came to Nina.

There was something not quite straightforward about Noel Bertram. He had carefully avoided speaking first on any subject; had seemed always to wait for other people's lead; and while he asked a great many questions about John Stone, he gave no information respecting his own acquaintance with the millionaire.

"It is strange," thought Nina, as she went over the whole thing; "but he can't be an impostor. Mr. Clinton would be too careful for that. Besides, the theatrical manager had known him for years, and he had letters addressed to him as Mr. Bertram, whose dates went back for ten years. No, he must be Noel Bertram; but however poor Mr. Stone took such an extraordinary fancy to him I can't imagine! He's good to look at, but that's all."

Miss Dalton was downstairs before either Mr. Bertram or her friend the next morning, and found Mrs. Leslie composedly sorting two letters. She left off to ask,—

"Is he not charming, Nina? Really, I think dear Dulce a most fortunate girl!"

"Mr. Bertram is most agreeable," said Nina, far too wise to speak of her misgivings to one so talkative as the kind old chaperon; "and very handsome, too!"

"And he seemed so struck with her."

His own entrance prevented Nina's reply.

He crossed to her side with some remark about the snow—for there had been a heavy fall in the night, and now a thick, white carpet lay on the ground.

"It is so beautiful!" said Nina. "I always love the snow! it is so pure and white!"

"I fear that it may make the roads difficult for carriages, Miss Dalton; if so, we shall have the pleasure of your company a little longer."

It came to Nina as a revelation that he believed she was leaving Stoneleigh that day, and also that he would be glad to get rid of her.

It set her thinking. Why in the world should he wish for her absence, unless, indeed, there was some secret in his history he feared her finding out?

"Oh! I am not going home yet," she said, lightly. "Dulce says she cannot spare me."

"No," put in Mrs. Leslie, "you must not forsake us till after the dinner-party. Our loss is too recent, Mr. Bertram, for us to go into society, but we thought it right you should be introduced to the Highshire notables, and so I have sent out invitations for next Thursday evening; before then I expect most of the gentlemen near will have called on you."

"I am so sorry," said Noel simply. "Mrs. Leslie, I would much rather you had not gone out of your way for my gratification. I assure you that such society as I had last night is pleasanter to me than all the dinner-parties in the world."

Enter Dulce, in time to hear the last word.

"What are you talking of the dinner-party? Oh, I assure you, Mr. Bertram, it is an absolute necessity; all the neighbourhood would feel aggrieved if they were not allowed to come and stare at you. You see, Highshire is a very quiet little place, and the chance does not often come of meeting anyone who has actually been advertised for in the agony columns!"

Noel shook his head.

"I warn you, Miss Stone, I don't shine in society. I have a horrid knack of saying wrong things; you will have to give me a description of the guests beforehand, so that I am warned."

"Mrs. Leslie will do that. We have only asked twelve people, as there are four of ourselves, and sixteen seems large enough for a dinner-party. Lord and Lady Raymond are coming; she is the dearest old lady, and, of course, the Earl is the leader of society in these parts."

She seemed to speak to Mrs. Leslie, and so missed the effect of her words. Nina, who was on the watch, saw a sharp twinge pass over Mr. Bertram's muscles as though a sudden pain had seized him. It passed almost directly, and he inquired,—

"Are there any juvenile Raymonds?"

"They are childless. In fact, there is a kind of mystery about who will succeed the Earl. He had two brothers, but one died young, and the other went to America years ago. I suppose his son will really be the next peer. Only fancy, a Yankee Earl! Does it not seem terrible?"

"Oh! the coronet will gild the lack of grammar," said Mr. Bertram, a little bitterly. "If Lord Raymond is an old man and has no son, I suppose the estate is very much neglected?"

"Not at all; it is admirably managed. Lord Raymond has an agent who has lived with him for years—'honest Jim Brown,' they call him hereabouts—a bluff, countified-looking man, but the very soul of integrity."

"That must be a useful quality to Lord Raymond?"

"It is; he leaves everything to old Brown. I believe Jim began life as a stable-boy and worked his way up."

"To what?" asked Mr. Bertram, half curiously. "What should you call his present position? I suppose an Earl's agent does not make a gentleman?"

"I think Jim Brown would feel very uncomfortable if he had to appear as a gentleman," said Mrs. Leslie, suddenly joining in the conversation. "Why, though he has the most wonderful head for figures, he can't speak a sentence without a blunder, and his 'go all in the wrong place.' He lives in a dear little cottage in the Earl's grounds, and is never so happy as on a summer's evening taking off his coat and gardening in his shirt-sleeves. His wife keeps no servant and wrings out the clothes with her own hands. They are a most worthy old couple; but, really, the idea of poor Brown working as a gentleman seems too absurd."

"Mr. Bertram did not know," said Dulce, gently, guessing he was evidently annoyed at his mistake, "and you know, goodly, some agents are really the younger sons of county families."

The horses came round about eleven, and the two young ladies started for a ride, escorted by Mr. Bertram, who, though he declared it was years since he had been in a saddle, proved himself a famous rider.

He talked a great deal of London and London pleasures, and so pleasant was his manner, so diverting his conversation, that Dulce forgot her last night's forebodings, and seemed quite taken with her handsome attendant.

Nina was the silent one of the party. She had defended Noel from Dulce's strictures the night before; but all the same, she did not like his manners to-day. Herself he hardly noticed; all his attentions, all his compliments, were for Dulce.

There was not one spice of jealousy in Nina's nature. If only this man were worthy of her! and nothing would give her greater pleasure than to see them married; but was he worthy?

"We must go home by the Raymond meadows," said Dulce, when it became plain they must hurry if they would not keep Mrs. Leslie waiting lunch. "It saves at least two miles, and, maybe, Mr. Bertram, we shall meet the worthy Jim, about whose social status you were so curious."

There came a look into his eyes not good to see.

Nina perfectly longed to place herself between him and Dulce; she was not nervous in general, but that frown terrified her.

"I have not the slightest desire to see the worthy man," said Mr. Bertram stiffly, "nor his employers either. I daresay the Earl is some poor, stuck-up old idiot."

Dulce looked at him, bewildered by his change of manner. She was about to speak, but she saw Nina was ready with a retort, and left the field open for her friend.

"Lord Raymond is the shrewdest man in the county," said Nina, coldly. "Mr. Bertram, perhaps your social customs were learnt abroad. In England," she laid a stress on her last word, "ladies are not used to hear a stranger abuse their friends."

"Upon my honour I meant no harm," said Noel promptly. "You see, Miss Dalton, on the boards, a man picks up a few mistakes."

Nina accepted the apology but in her own mind could not agree with its reasoning. If Mr. Bertram meant he had represented insolent young men on the stage till he felt forced to act like them in real life, why, then it was to be hoped he would never be called on to play the villain of a drama, or he would think himself called on to reproduce the murder or other tragedy in real life.

There was not a trace of the agent in Lord Raymond's grounds, and Noel Bertram completely recovered his good-humour before they

reached Stoneleigh, and were greeted with the news the Earl had driven over to call on Mr. Bertram, and been persuaded to remain to lunch.

Nina, who was honestly fond of the kind old nobleman, and had a high opinion of his judgment, watched his introduction to Noel with great interest. The peer was cordial to a degree, the young man a little stiff and distant, but on the whole it was satisfactory, and before lunch was over Noel had put forward his conversational powers to such an extent that the Earl declared he was a great acquisition to the neighbourhood, and begged him to come over some morning and see his estate. Noel promised, but Miss Dalton remarked he was careful not to set the day, and that he seemed decidedly relieved when the Earl took his departure.

"You ought to feel happy!" said Dulce, with a smile. "Don't you know there are three examinations every stranger has to pass before they can belong to the *Highlife Elite*. My father used to call them the preliminary, the intermediate, and final. Now, in your case, the two first have been waived and you have passed the final, that is, Lord Raymond's approbation, with honours. He is quite an autocrat here."

"He seemed easily pleased!"

"He is a dear old man. I often think it is a pity he has no children of his own!"

"I suppose he is enormously rich?"

"He has a large fortune. Of course a large part of it is entailed, and will go with the title, but there is quite enough besides to make a rich man of whoever inherits it."

Mr. Bertram seemed impressed; really for a man who declared himself quite disinterested he took very kindly to the mention of money.

The days passed on; the young ladies were thrown a great deal with the future Master of Stoneleigh, though from the first all his attentions were reserved for Dulce. He never spoke a word of love to her, he never alluded in the least to her father's will; but yet it was clear to everyone at Stoneleigh (except the girl herself) that Noel's dearest wish was to fulfil the behest of his generous benefactor, and make Dulce his wife, and the true mistress of Stoneleigh.

Nina Dalton watched them closely, and yet could not make up her mind. Dulce was a good deal in Mr. Bertram's company, but that perhaps could not be helped in such a small party when he was her guest, but she never seemed at ease with him; and, though he evidently meant to marry her, Nina could not quite convince herself he was in love. There was a kind of stiffness, a sort of duty air about his attentions; there was nothing of the fire and enthusiasm of love; it was more like acting—very good acting too, of its kind—but still not the genuine passion.

The dinner party came, and went. Lord Raymond took more kindly even than before to Noel, but the Countess formed a very unfavourable opinion of him.

"My dear," she said to Nina, when she got her to herself for a *little-à-little*, "I don't like that man. I am quite sure he is not his natural self, and he never looks you in the face."

"I believe he has weak eyes."

"Then let him wear spectacles. Mark my words, Nina, he is not worthy of Dulce Stone, and if she marries him she will rue it all her days!"

Poor Nina felt quite powerless to contradict the Countess, for her own prejudice against Mr. Bertram had not in the least diminished. She could only say that as yet there was no engagement; she did not even believe Mr. Bertram had broached the subject to Dulce.

This time there was no refusing Lord Raymond's hospitality. He fixed a day for the whole party to drive over and spend a long day at his house. He was always making improvements in his grounds, and thus, however often his friends visited him, had ever something fresh to show them.

The morning was a beautiful bright February day, and Dulce came down exulting in the prospect of the expedition. In her deep mourning she went to very few houses; but the Raymonds were fond of her, and would take no denial; so she had consented to go, and now that the day had actually come she felt quite in spirits.

Mrs. Leslie met them with a lament. "A letter for Mr. Bertram marked 'immediate.' I do hope there is nothing the matter!"

But her hopes were disappointed. It seemed Mr. Clinton required Noel's presence on most important business, and he would be obliged to go to London by the morning train.

"I am awfully annoyed at missing the visit to Lord Raymond's," he said eagerly; "but what am I to do? I am sure Mr. Clinton would not send such a summons without urgent cause."

"Of course not," agreed Mrs. Leslie. "I see you will have to go. We will explain things to the Countess, and she will quite understand!"

But it so happened a difficulty arose in the day's programme. The baroness would, of course, be required to drive the ladies to Raymond Hall. The coachman must accompany it. The station was in quite a different direction; and the groom, who should have driven the dog cart, had a sprained arm. There was a great deal of discussion, and then Nina said quietly,—

"I will drive Mr. Bertram to the station! You know Raymond Hall is so close to my own home that I can go over very often, and so my missing the visit will not be such a disappointment to them as if they did not see Dulce or you, Mrs. Leslie. Mr. Bertram, I am a famous whip, and promise faithfully not to break your bones!"

He did not like the arrangement, she could see that, but he was bound to fall in with it; and Nina drove him off, feeling she had a most reluctant victim, and also determined to find out whether (and she strongly doubted it) the summons to London was genuine.

"I am so sorry you missed your visit through me," he said, politely; "awfully inconvenient this summons to London, isn't it?"

"Awfully! I thought Mr. Clinton never did business on Saturday? I suppose this is an exceptional case!"

"Quite exceptional!"

"I wish you would ask him to come down to Stoneleigh soon. I am sure Dulce would like to see him!"

"She has one guardian on the spot," said Mr. Bertram, coldly. "Why should she want to consult the other?"

"I don't say she wanted to consult him! She likes him as a friend!"

Mr. Bertram looked put out.

"He is not an old man, and no doubt five hundred a year would be very acceptable to him! Do you think he wants to marry her?"

"You must be mad to think of such a thing! Why, he is years older than Dulce, and his heart is buried in his wife's grave!"

"I can't help being anxious," said Noel, gravely. "I know you don't like me, Miss Dalton; but you are very fond of Dulce. Don't you think it would be a good thing for her if she married me?"

"Do you mean that you have asked her?"

"You know I cannot ask her till I have been at Stoneleigh a month. Besides, I don't want to ask her without encouragement."

"I don't think Dulce will marry anyone without love," said Nina, slowly.

He was gone at last, and Nina crossed the platform to speak to a friend on the other side who was waiting the train from London. It came in soon, and the friend disappeared. Nina was going towards the bridge which would take her across to where the dogcart waited, when she heard someone inquiring the way to Stoneleigh.

Miss Dalton was most unconventional.



[A MOST EVENTFUL MEETING.]

She knew that a little hamlet round John Stone's mansion took its name from his property, and she concluded the stranger was going there, and not to the house itself. But that did not hinder her from offering her aid.

"I am just driving back to Stoneleigh," she said, simply; "and if you would like a seat in the dogcart it will save you a long walk."

She saw then that he was a tall, well-made man, not far from thirty, whose face was bronzed, as though by Eastern suns. He wore a long dark beard, but the charm of his countenance was a pair of soft brown eyes which lighted up with a world of feeling and expression.

"I shall be very grateful," he said, with the perfect good breeding which accepts a favour as frankly as it is offered; "for I am quite a stranger in Highshire, and should probably lose my way."

He handed Nina to her seat, placed himself beside her, and they drove off—Miss Dalton, if it must be confessed, much preferring her present companion to the one she had brought to the station.

"I wonder," he said, as they drove along, "whether there is an inn at Stoneleigh."

"Yes; but not a grand one, just a quiet place where artists put up in the summer. You would most likely have it all to yourself now."

"I am not afraid of solitude. I have come down here to make some inquiries about a friend of mine, who used to live in these parts. Of course he may have left, but I thought I should like to see the place."

"Highshire is very pretty, but pleasanter in summer. As for Stoneleigh, it is a mere hamlet, taking its name from Mr. Stone's estate."

"I used to know Mr. Stone at one time. Is he living on his own property now?"

Nina stared at him.

"I hope you weren't a great friend of his?"

"Oh, no; we were fellow-travellers once, that's all. Do you mean he is dead, poor old man?"

"Last October. Dulce is here still. Did you know her? She would be so pleased to see anyone who remembered her father!"

He shook his head.

"I never met Miss Stone. I suppose she is a great heiress now?"

"Where can you have lived?" demanded Nina, forgetting it was hardly etiquette to thus-cross question a stranger.

"In South Africa for a good many years; but, pardon me, I don't quite see how that should affect the question."

"Only that John Stone's will has been the subject of discussion for months. He was a millionaire, and he positively worshipped his daughter, yet he cut her off with a bare five hundred a-year unless she married a man she had never seen!"

"And is she going to marry him?"

"I hope not! In my opinion she had far better be poor all her days than accept wealth if Noel Bertram's hand goes with it!"

"He seems to have offended you! May I ask if you have ever seen him?"

"Rather!" said Nina, defiantly. "Why, we are both fellow-guests at Stoneleigh, and I have to hear his praises sung continually. He is handsome, clever, charming! Oh, I can't recall the string of adjectives employed to discuss his merits. And all the while Dulce goes about with a kind of dazed look, like a creature in a dream, and I can't think of anything but Red Ridinghood and the wolf in the old fairy tale. Oh, dear!"—and poor Nina awoke to a sense of the proprieties—"what have I been about to talk like this to you, a perfect stranger?"

He smiled.

"I hope we shall not be strangers always; and, meanwhile, please believe your confidence is quite safe."

"But you must think it very strange?"

"I have seen so many strange things; perhaps I am not so much surprised as another person might be! Ah! there is the inn, and I must say good-bye. May I not know the name of my kind benefactress?"

"I am Nina Dalton!"

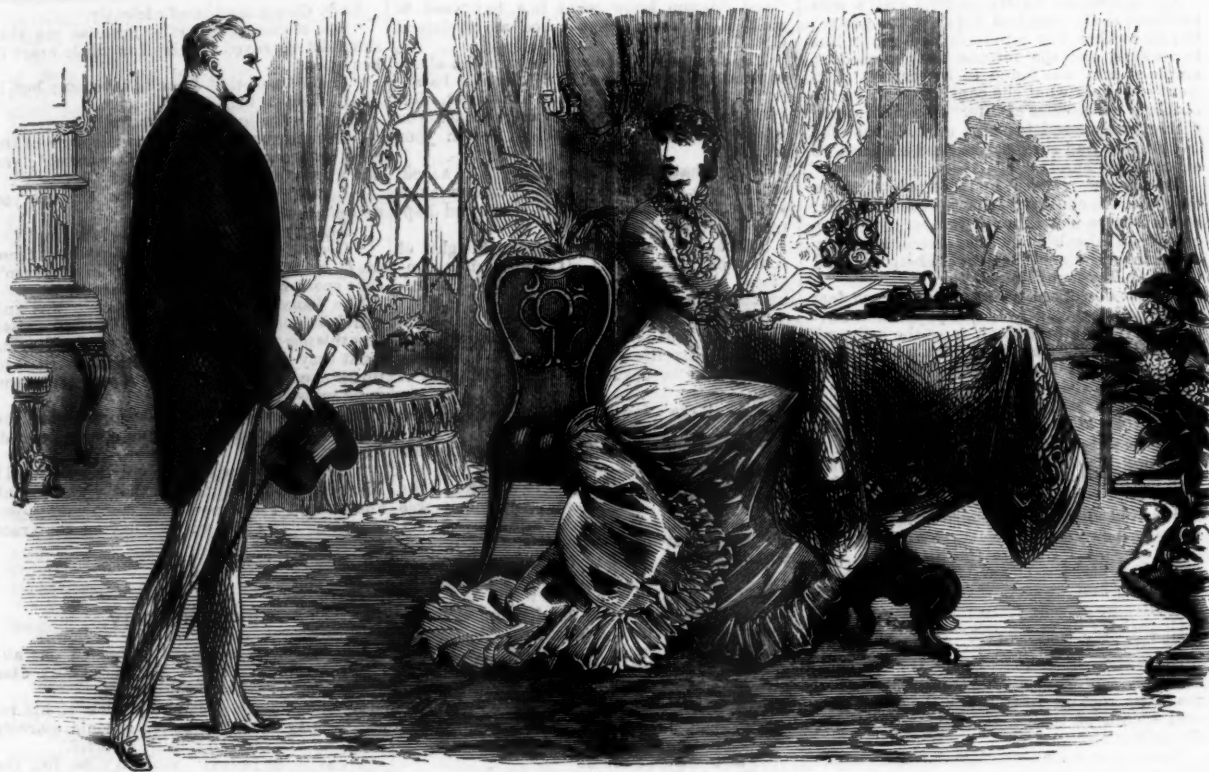
"Some day I shall hope to meet you again, and thank you for your kindness. Meanwhile," and he lowered his voice, "believe that I will keep your confidence respecting Red Ridinghood and the wolf."

"Dear! dear!" thought Nina, as she drove on to her house, "whatever made me chatter like that to a stranger? It was all true, every word of it, still I need not have said it. And who can he be? and what in the world can bring a man like that to Highshire in the depths of winter?"

(To be continued.)

THERE is no bridge so difficult to cross as the bridge of a broken promise. Be chary of making rash vows; ponder well ere you say I will do this or that; but once having given your word abide by it, though the heavens fall. Perform your contracts when made, at any sacrifice save that of honour.

LUCK AND LABOUR.—If the boy who exclaims "Just my luck!" was truthful, he would say, "Just my laziness!" or "Just my inattention!" Mr. Cobden wrote proverbs about "Luck and Labour." It would be well for boys to memorise them: Luck is waiting for something to turn up. Labour, with keen eyes and strong will, will turn up something. Luck lies in bed, and wishes the postman would bring him news of a legacy. Labour turns out at six o'clock, and with busy pen or ringing hammer lays the foundation of a competence. Luck whines. Labour whistles. Luck relies on chances. Labour on character. Luck strides down to indigence. Labour strides upward to independence.



["YOU WERE KIND ENOUGH TO SEND FOR ME?" HE SAID, QUIETLY. "I HOPE NOTHING IS THE MATTER?"]

MORE THAN A BROTHER.

—10:—

CHAPTER XLIII.

"My dear child, you are looking the shadow of your former self!" exclaimed Lady Belfield, as she found time amongst her numerous engagements to spare five minutes for the critical study of her daughter's face. "I am perfectly certain you ought to go abroad for change of air."

"Nothing would induce me," was the prompt answer. "I am sick of every place, and you could scarcely find one to which we haven't been."

"But what is there to stay for? There's scarcely a soul left in London, and the park is full of country-cousins. I tell you frankly that I am dying to get off, and if your father can come with me, I shall run down to the Lavingtons next Monday. Surely you won't wish to stay behind?"

"I shall stay behind whether I wish it or not," looking down at her black dress. "I could not go anywhere in such mourning as mine."

"Perhaps not," with an impatient sigh; "but at least you could go to Belfield, and be as quiet as you like. Dear, dear, where have I put my card-case?" looking hastily over a table which was covered with costly bric-à-brac. "I shall be late, and that's what I hate. But really, you know, Gerda, I am getting quite uneasy about you. I never thought you cared much about that poor young fellow!"

"You needn't say that," interrupting her mother with a frown of pain. "You taught me that love was not necessary in marriage, but I should have a heart of stone," rising in sudden agitation, "if I felt nothing after such a shock as that. The wonder is that I have kept my senses, and sometimes I feel as if they were going."

The Marchioness gave a frightened look at her daughter, and exclaimed,—

"I wish to heaven Fitzmaur were here! He always understood you better than anyone else," and having found her missing card-case, hurried from the room, too much occupied with her trifling engagements to spare much thought for the graver anxieties of her home.

When left alone, Lady Gerda paced up and down the large, beautifully-furnished room, which seemed no fitting scene for the stronger emotions of life.

She was like the wreck of her former self, and the lines of her superb figure were losing their roundness. The expression of her face had changed as much as everything else, and no one could call her now the "animated iceberg," for there was a look in the eyes which told of depths of thought—a look which almost seemed like one of remembered horror.

No one could understand what was the matter with her. The family doctor hemmed and hawed, talked of want of tone, and recommended change of air.

He was puzzled, and frankly confessed it; but as Lady Gerda flatly refused to discuss her symptoms he was not given a fair chance. Nothing would induce her to leave town, and yet neither her mother nor her father could imagine any reason for her wishing to stay, as she would not go into society, or even drive in the park, where many people were likely to be.

She could settle to no occupation, and reading was impossible to her. Her thoughts were always either at Wray Hall or Aylesbury Gaol, though it was torture to her to think of them.

Sir Oriel's death had made all her debts more pressing, but she did not disturb herself much about them. There would be a great disturbance about them when they came to her father's knowledge, but she supposed the money to pay them would be found somehow.

As to their actual payment she had no price and no conscience left. Money, for once in her life, seemed an utterly worthless commodity. And yet not so very long ago she had bartered her beauty and her happiness for a fortune.

If it had not been for that would she ever have bent down her burning forehead in intolerable anguish, and laid it on the marble mantelpiece? It was so beautifully carved that the Marquis would not allow it to be draped with plush or velvet, according to the present fashion; but he never guessed that it was to be one day a resting-place for his daughter's lovely face, as she confessed herself the most miserable woman upon earth.

The daughter of a Marquis, the beauty of the season, with what would have seemed to many a proud position in a splendid home for the present, and an unlimited chance before her in the future! And yet now, in the prime of her womanhood, the most miserable woman on earth!

There was no one to hear her, so she could loose for the moment the terrible restraint—she put on all her most secret feelings when with her mother. In the utter silence of that magnificent room she gave vent to a low moan, a sound to which its panelled walls were but little accustomed.

"I can't bear it," she gasped, raising her head, and resting her elbows on the marble instead. "I know I shall go mad, and that would be a worse punishment than anything else. It would turn any woman's brain, and mine was tried enough before by the disappearance of Fitzmaur—Fitzmaur! the only soul I ever loved till Raymond came! And now both have deserted me!"

She took a quiet turn up and down over the polished floor and Persian mats, her tall figure in its handsome black draperies reflected in countless mirrors as she passed.

How bright, how simple and happy her life might have been if her father had never succeeded, so unexpectedly, to the Marquise!

At one time, to be Raymond Lovell's wife had been the height and depth of her desire; but since then her ambition had grown like her wants, and the fortune that seemed so ample at first was found to be scarcely sufficient to supply what she considered to be the absolute necessities of life. She had aimed higher, and missed her aim, and all that she had grasped had turned, like dead-sea fruit, to ashes in her hands.

To-day she realised, more completely than ever, that she could not go on as she had begun; but the more she thought it over, the more convinced she became that there was only one man in the world who could help her, and that was Raymond Lovell.

She sat down, and penned a letter as fast as the pen could fly over the paper, and having put it in an envelope, rang the bell, and giving it to a footman told him to take it at once to King's Bench Walk, Temple. To prevent delay she said he was to get into a hansom, and tell it to wait, when he got to the Temple, in case Mr. Lovell should like to make use of it.

Having done this she retired to her own boudoir, which was fitted up with dark blue velvet to set off the fairness of her complexion, and waited there in agony of impatience. Perhaps he was out and the footman would have to wait for hours for his return, and even then perhaps he would be engaged out to dinner, and find it impossible to answer the letter in person.

Or perhaps he would not care to come after their last cold parting at Wray. He had been ill since then, and she had made the Marchioness send to inquire after him, but he had made no sign in return, and had not even sent a card of thanks for kind inquiries to Grosvenor-street.

There was a step outside the door which sent the blood to her face, but it was only a footman bringing in an unimportant note on a dainty silver tray, and in bitter disappointment her heart sank.

Half-an-hour passed; she took up a novel and tried to read, but the words seemed to dance before her eyes, and she laid it down again in a sort of despair.

Could it be true that she had actually sent for him, and he was not willing to come? Could any humiliation be deeper than that? She felt as if she must have some occupation, and sat down to the table to answer the note, when suddenly the door opened very gently, and Raymond Lovell came in unannounced.

She sprang to her feet and held out both her hands, too much overcome by her emotion to find a word to utter. He had come, and her heart beat so wildly that she could not speak!

He took one of the outstretched hands and bowed over it gravely, as if he were almost a stranger instead of her oldest friend.

"You were kind enough to send for me?" he said, quietly. "I hope nothing's the matter?"

She put her hand upon her heart to still its flutterings, chilled to the very marrow by his manner.

"Everything's the matter!" she said almost fiercely, and then added, abruptly, "May I give you some tea?"

"Oh, yes! He should like some tea very much, this hot weather made him thirsty."

She rang the bell; it was soon served, and he sat down on the opposite side of the small mother-of-pearl table instead of placing himself on the blue velvet sofa, by her side. As he watched her well-shaped hands busy with the small silver teapot and cream jug, he was surprised to see how they trembled, and felt more anxious than ever to know the reason why she had sent for him. Lady Gerda, on the other hand, seemed in no hurry to tell him, for now that the moment had come her courage failed her.

"You are not looking very grand," she said presently. "I believe you've been working too hard?"

"I've been pretty busy," he said, quietly,

"and do you know what has happened to me? Mr. Surman has asked me to defend Cora Paget!"

The elegant little sugar tongs in the shape of an alligator fell from Lady Gerda's hand.

"Thank Heaven!" she exclaimed, fervently. "I sent for you in order to ask you to save her, and now her fate lies in your hands."

"But what could I have done?" he asked, in surprise. "I was perfectly useless as a witness! I could only say what had happened before I left!"

"Oh! but you would have thought of something, Raymond! If that girl is convicted, what will happen to her?" she asked, breathlessly.

"They rarely hang a woman," he said, very low, "but it will either be that or penal servitude for life. And in that case she would soon be dead—she could not stand it long."

Lady Gerda's face turned as white as her handkerchief.

"It can't be—it can't be!" she said, passionately.

"I wish you had thought that before," he said bitterly. "For everyone tells me it was your evidence that did it."

"You forget the footman," she murmured, with pale lips.

"No, I don't, but it was you that put the words into his mouth. He would not have dared to strike out that line for himself, with the whole household against him!"

"Oh, don't be hard on me!" she cried, clasping her hands. "You might have some pity for me. I was so upset, I scarcely knew what I said!"

"Strange, for Mason told me that you seemed as composed as if you were talking in your own drawing-room."

"Then he lies!" fiercely. "I always knew he hated me. That man would like to see me in prison!"

"How can you say so?" looking at her agitated face in calm surprise. "Mason—the soul of respectability—a man whom I could trust as I would myself?"

"Yes, he likes you, and he would die for a Paget; and he would kill me if he could to save Cora. Raymond, you won't let him, will you? I would do anything to save her, but not that!" trembling from head to foot, as she started to her feet.

"My dear Gerda, how can you be so foolish?" looking pitifully into her white face, as he put down his teacup and stood before her. "In sober England it is not possible to die for anyone else; and why should you be mixed up in it at all? We know that you weren't the last to see him."

She bent her head, so that he could not see her face as she laid her white hand on his coat-sleeve.

"You liked me once, Raymond?"

"It was rather more than liking!" he said, bitterly.

"Yes, and by that love I conjure you to save her. Oh! if you only knew what a hell upon earth my life is to me now!" she gasped.

"But why?" looking down on the hand he had so often kissed, and not daring to touch it.

"Oh! if I told you," looking up into his face despairingly, "you would hate me more than you do now!"

"Heaven knows I don't hate you, Gerda!" a spasm of emotion passing across his handsome face. "Think of Cora, bearing up under the falsest charge that was ever brought against man or woman, with a quiet courage—a noble fortitude that nothing can shake; and remember how different her position is to yours!"

"And why does she bear up?" almost fiercely. "Not because she's brave, but because she doesn't feel it. Her heart was buried in Oriol's grave, and she doesn't care a straw what happens to her now!"

"Poor girl! and in a prison she would have such endless time to think!" pityingly.

Lady Gerda shuddered violently.

"She mustn't go there! Promise me that she shall be saved!" with her whole heart in her voice.

"I will do all that I can to save her; but, if I fail, Heaven help her!"

Lady Gerda looked at him fixedly.

"Let me know the day and the hour of the trial as soon as you know it yourself; you don't know what depends on it?"

"I won't forget. But how I wish you needn't be there!"

"I shall not leave London till it's over!"

"Gerda, see you keeping anything from me?" he said, very earnestly. "For Heaven's sake speak out before it is too late!"

She looked at him with athen lips and startled eyes; her mouth opened. He waited breathlessly for the first words, almost fearing that they might disclose, when Lady Belfield threw open the door in a state of evident and most unusual excitement.

She forgot to be annoyed or surprised at the sight of Raymond Lovell, as she exclaimed, angrily,—

"Only fancy what I have just heard! Fitzmaur has been to see that girl in gaol, and started for America on some wild goose-chase the day after, without having the grace to come near us!"

CHAPTER XLIV.

The long summer days succeeded one another, but the interest in the Paget case rather increased than diminished.

Raymond Lovell felt the burden of his responsibility so deeply that he could scarcely make up his mind to retain his brief.

What if he failed? Wouldn't he feel the burden of that failure till the last day of his life? Would he ever cease to be haunted by a small white face and a pair of dark, despairing eyes? Wouldn't he always be tortured by the thought that some one else might have done so much better for his client?

There was much talk about it at the bar, for it was most unusual for so young a man to be leading counsel in such an important case.

But Mr. Surman knew what he was about when he chose Raymond Lovell. He had a great idea of his intellect, and happened to know that he had distinguished himself by his eloquence, in the debating society at Oxford.

If a man were ever to rise to impassioned eloquence, would it not be when he was defending a young and beautiful girl from a charge that he knew to be false—more especially when the girl had been known to him from her earliest childhood, and endeared to him by a thousand associations?

George Surman knew the strength as well as the weakness of the human heart, and he counted on Lovell's deep interest in the case giving him a force and power which should carry the jury away from all the cold and pitiless logic of the prosecution, bring conviction to their minds, and compel them to give a verdict of "not guilty."

Therefore, whilst many of the experienced barristers shrugged their shoulders, and called Mr. Surman "a thundering idiot" or "an utter fool," he held to his own opinion with the utmost placidity, and would not confess to the smallest misgiving.

Lovell was at last so tortured by his doubts and fears that he went to the solicitor's well-appointed chambers, and begged him, as a personal favour, to give the brief into more experienced hands.

This Mr. Surman stoutly refused to do; and in the end Raymond was thankful that he had declined.

As the day of the trial drew near, and he realised more completely the awful issues at stake, he felt that it would have literally maddened him to trust them even to the cleverest man at the Bar.

A stranger could not have defended Cora as

he would, knowing as he did all the ins-and-outs of the girl's innocent life.

He knew that her love for Oriel Paget was as deep and unchangeable as his own for Lady Gerda Staunton; and though he had often feared that evil would ensue from her uncontrolled temper—it was evil to herself that he had been afraid of, and not to the man she loved better than herself and all the world put together.

In the midst of his anxieties he bethought himself of Lord Moortown, who had been removed to his chambers in Piccadilly, and dropped in to ask him how he was.

"Getting on splendidly!" the Earl said, cheerfully, as he lay on a gigantic sofa, supported by many pillows of varied hue and gorgeous material. "It was a regular knock-me-down sort of accident, wasn't it?"

"It was!" emphatically, as he dropped into a chair. "I was awfully sorry not to be able to come and see you."

"Very good of you; everybody has been as kind as possible, and I assure you I'm not to be pitted."

Raymond looked at him in silent admiration, wondering how he could bear his terrible misfortune so bravely.

He could scarcely keep the tears from his own eyes at the sight of that once athletic frame, with its magnificent proportions, laid there upon its cushions as helpless as a baby.

"You bear it uncommonly well, I think," he said, gruffly.

"Perhaps you haven't heard of my pick-me-up?" the Earl asked, with shining eyes. "Do you know that the tumble out of that phaeton brought me the happiness of my life?"

"Some one told me that you were going to marry Miss Ashley," thinking to himself that a dozen Miss Ashleys would not have consoled him for the loss of the use of his legs.

But then Beatrice never had been his one particular star, which made all the difference in her fancied value.

"Yes; pity has done the trick for me when everything else failed—dear little soul! But I mean to turn out a fraud! She may marry a cripple, but at the end of a year or two I'll promise to knock you down, or challenge you to a walking match!"

"I only hope you will be able to: and I'm sure I wish you both all possible happiness." Involuntarily he ended with a sigh.

Lord Moortown looked up sympathetically, and immediately began to talk over the Paget case.

"I feel for that poor girl so intensely," he said, after a long discussion on the pros and cons. "If I hadn't been tied by the leg I should have gone to see her like a shot! Doesn't it strike you that there is some mystery in the case?"

"No," said Raymond, promptly. "I think it is as plain as black and white."

"Well, I don't; though, of course, my opinions are worth nothing. What was Lady Gerda's motive for trying to throw the blame on Miss Paget?" watching the barrister's face narrowly from under his long lashes.

He saw it change, though the change was hardly perceptible.

"I don't know what you mean," said Lovell, gravely. "She simply told the truth. You wouldn't have had her hold it back?"

"But she need not have volunteered it! I don't know how many fellows have said to me, 'Lady Gerda must have been infernally jealous of that Miss Paget to wish to send her to the gallows!'"

"Don't say that!" he exclaimed, stung to the quick. "Cora was the last to see poor Oriel, and if Lady Gerda hadn't mentioned it, it was bound to come out! That is the first question asked, 'Who was the last to see him alive?'"

"Was she the last?" said Lord Moortown, very quietly.

Raymond stared at him.

"Of course she was! There is no doubt of that!"

"It struck me that Lady Gerda was in an awful funk for herself. It was not hatred of Cora Paget that egged her on, but fears for her own safety!"

"That's absurd!" excitedly. "She parted with him on the best of terms, and went up straight to her room. We know that Cora saw him after that, so what had she to be afraid of?"

"Exactly. What was she afraid of?" very calmly.

"I don't know what you are driving at!" jumping up with a flushed face. "But I think you are most unjust to a girl who has never done you a harm in her life!"

Lord Moortown looked down at his poor, useless legs, and thought of the day when he drove Lady Gerda back from that luncheon at Richmond.

She had put up her large, white parasol to keep off the dust, and caused the accident by putting it straight before his eyes at a critical corner.

He did not bless that parasol when he found the phaeton in the act of turning over, but he had been too chivalrous to say one word about it after the accident, lest, like Adam, he should throw the blame on a modern Eve.

She had done him harm enough, but he bore her no malice.

"You couldn't bring her to see me?" he asked, with a doubtful smile.

"No, I couldn't," with the utmost decision.

Lord Moortown looked up at his handsome, flushed face.

"Cora Paget must be got off!"

"She shall be! I swear she shall! If I don't pull her through, I shall out my throat!"

"That would be hard on Lady Gerda."

"I don't know what you mean," he said again.

"Yes you do. There are very dark days before her, and there will be no one but you to console her!"

"Why should there be dark days for her? She was not head over ears in love with Oriel," almost defiantly.

"No, but she has lost a husband, a brother, and a fortune, and one of those losses would be enough for most people. Must you go? I'm awfully obliged to you for coming. Mind you look me up again!"

As soon as Raymond was gone, the bright look vanished from Lord Moortown's face. He turned over on his pillows and groaned aloud, overcome by a sense of his own helplessness. If he could only get to Lady Gerda and see her face to face, he felt convinced that he could worm her secret from her.

He knew that he had a strange power over her, and the exercise of that power might be the saving of a girl's life; for he felt absolutely certain that in the depths of her heart she knew of some reason why she was likely to be suspected instead of Cora.

He could not appeal to her compassion and ask her to come and see a poor invalid, with the purpose of entrapping her into a confession, but he might frankly tell her that he would like to talk over the coming trial with her, as there were some intricacies in the case which he could not understand. Then, if she was not afraid, he would do his best.

The letter was written with many apologies. If she would honour him so far, he knew that Miss Mackenzie would be delighted to accompany her, etc.

The answer came without delay.

"After this dreadful trial is over, I shall be only too delighted to see you (Lady Gerda wrote); but, for the present, I see no one and go nowhere, by the doctor's orders, in consequence of the shattered state of my nerves. Believe me, it is not want of sympathy with you that keeps me away, but my strength and my courage fail me for the first time in my life, and I am better at home.—Yours, most sincerely, GERDA E. M. STAUNTON."

"So that has failed," and Lord Moortown tore the thick note-paper into shreds. "I can do no more, for I have nothing to go upon and

no right to interfere; but the girl ought to be saved if there's justice in Heaven!"

CHAPTER XLV.

It seemed as if everything were waiting for the conclusion of the Paget case. The shutters were not put up in Belfield House, Grosvenor-street, because Lady Gerda would not leave town till the trial was over.

Beatrice Ashley was waiting till Cora Paget's fate was decided, before she gave herself "for better for worse" to her invalid lover.

And Miss Mackenzie was waiting for the issue with feverish impatience, as she intended to offer a home to Cora if Lady Paget continued to maintain her extraordinary delusion about her.

Lady Gerda felt like a prisoner shut up between the four walls of Belfield House; but nothing would induce her to stir out as the fatal day drew nearer. She passed the whole of the day in loneliness, for it was the custom of the Stauntons to breakfast in their own rooms, and Lord Belfield generally lunched at his club.

Lady Belfield, unable to endure London when most of her friends had left it, and the park was becoming a desert, had run down to Devonshire to pay a long-promised visit to Lord and Lady Lavington. Sometimes Lord Belfield dined with his daughter at half-past eight, but more often he was out, and she alone.

Merton watched her mistress with growing anxiety, for she seemed to fade before her eyes. The beautiful face lost much of its charm, as it grew thinner day by day, and the eyes that had often led on men to madness became hard and defiant, as they seemed to increase in size. It was melancholy to see her walking about that large beautifully-appointed house—condemned to loneliness by her own will, and starting at every knock at the door. Her nerves were so upset that she could not bear to be in the large drawing-room by herself during the evening, but preferred to sit in her own boudoir.

Beatrice Ashley was so angry with her, on account of the way she had behaved to Cora, that she did not intend to come and see her, but Lord Moortown prayed her to do so as a personal favour, and he never had to ask twice.

Miss Mackenzie dropped her at the door, where she was met with the usual formula.

"Lady Gerda does not see anybody at present," and gladly would she have stepped into the brougham and driven away. But she remembered Lord Moortown's earnest wish, and sent up her name with a message.

Rather to her own disappointment she was admitted, and with a certain amount of nervousness she followed the footman to the blue velvet boudoir.

Lady Gerda received her gratefully, and thanked her for coming to look after her; but directly Beatrice made the smallest allusion to the trial she frowned, and told her she could not bear to talk of it.

Conversation was rather difficult when the most engrossing topic was forbidden; but Lady Gerda talked of Lord Moortown's accident with apparent sympathy, though she had deserted him at the time of it, and congratulated Beatrice on her marriage.

"I should have been desperately afraid of him, and I should have fainted at the idea of marrying him," she said, with a dreary attempt at a smile. "He has such a frightfully strong will under that lazy exterior!"

"His strong will could not bring you to see him," Beatrice answered quietly. "He almost made me feel jealous, he was so dreadfully disappointed. We are going to Piccadilly now; can't I induce you to come with us?"

"I go nowhere!" her face growing stern at once. "Why does he stop in town—country air would be infinitely better for him?"

"To be near me," with a bright blush.
 "And what on earth are you staying for? London is empty!"
 "We don't like to go far off till—till we know!"

"Absurd! You are not a witness. You could hear by telegram as soon as it was over."

"Yes, but if—all is right, she must come to us for a home; and if the worst comes, which Heaven forbid, I must be there to go her, to show her that some one loves her, and believes in her still," the tears starting to her eyes.

"Don't talk of it—I can't bear it," beginning to walk about the room in an excited manner, which alarmed and astonished her visitor.

"Why do you come here to plague me out of my senses? Don't you know that Raymond Lovell is to defend her, and of course that means she will be saved. I know—I know that he would save me if I were there instead of her. He would bring the verdict from the jury, if the judge and all the court were against him. I could trust him before the cleverest man on earth!"

"I should trust in Heaven and in my own innocence!" said Beatrice, gently, as she rose to say good-bye. "If murder has been done, Heaven will not let the innocent suffer for the guilty."

"Ah! if only I were half as good as you!" looking down for a moment into the sweet face with haggard eyes. "If I could only feel that Providence would watch over me when the worst came!"

"Providence is always watching over us, dear Lady Gerda. I wish you would tell me what is troubling you?" looking up with wistful eyes, that in their gentleness and sweetness contrasted strongly with the glance that met them.

Lady Gerda drew her hand away angrily.

"I think I have had enough—there is no mystery about it. I'm the most unfortunate woman under the sun. I have lost everything, and you ask me what is troubling me! If Lord Moortown sent you, tell him—no, tell him nothing," stopping herself abruptly.

With a great effort she controlled herself, and said, with a courteous smile,—

"Thank you so much for coming to see me, but I'm best alone. My nerves are all on edge, and I'm not fit for society."

Beatrice looked at her pityingly, and with a heavy heart took her leave, wondering if the sudden shock of Sir Ortel's death had really unhinged the poor girl's mind.

As she walked down the splendid staircase, and the heavily brocaded curtains were held back in the hall by a footman on either side, whilst a third opened the front door, she little guessed that in a few short weeks all this lavish magnificence would disappear as quickly as Cinderella's grand robes at the stroke of twelve.

The time fixed for the Assizes in Aylesbury was drawing very near, and public interest was continually excited by sensational reports about the coming trial.

Cora Paget was said to have committed suicide in her prison, which was tantamount to a confession of guilt, people remarked to each other with significant glances; and then somebody in a club murmured to somebody else that a girl in high life had "gone off her head," and the most startling revelations would be out before the week was ended.

Even Raymond Lovell, the clever, long-headed barrister, was made the substratum of a wonderful piece of gossip.

He was said to have connived at the defendant's guilt, and to have sworn to marry her even at the foot of the gallows.

He smiled grimly when this was reported to him, but there was no merriment in his heart. Friends watching him with kindly interest said that the Paget case was altogether too much for him:

Certainly his handsome face grew worn and thin as the days passed on, and his eyes began to have a frightened look—something like that which Lady Gerda's wore during those first few days at Wray Hall after the tragedy had happened.

Time after time his feet led him almost against his will to Grosvenor-street, but he never crossed the threshold of Belfield House.

His desire to save Cora led him up to the very doorstep; but a fear, which was a terror to him night and day, but which, nevertheless, he would not acknowledge to himself, dragged him back, though he paced up and down the pavement for hours in an agony of indecision. He could think of nothing else through the long hours of the day, and during the still longer hours of the sleepless night, when his eyes remained persistently open till the first grey light of dawning day crept in through the shutters.

If he had killed Ortel Paget with his own hand he could not have been more constantly haunted by the thought of his death.

That Cora had nothing to do with it he was perfectly convinced, and he was almost certain that she would be acquitted—almost, but not quite, and there lay the dreadful doubt.

The judge might take a contrary view to his, and sum up dead against him—the jury might follow his lead, against all the dictates of common sense.

And then, if he had left one stone unturned, would he ever forgive himself, or forget it, during all the length of the coming years?

That evening he fought a terrible conflict with himself, and at the end of it his wearied head sank down upon his arms, which rested on the table, and a bitter cry broke from his white lips,—

"Would to Heaven I had never loved you, Gerda! You have been the curse of my life!"

There was a knock at the front door. He pulled himself together, and went downstairs to open it with a dazed look in his eyes, for his clerk had gone home two hours ago.

"Fitzmaur! you here!" he exclaimed in surprise, as the Earl grasped his hand.

"Yes; and I'm not alone!" said Lord Fitzmaur, triumphantly. "I've brought you a witness who will save your case—Dr. Warner!"

"I am very glad to see you, doctor!" said Raymond, looking with some revival of hope into Dr. Warner's genial face; "but I haven't an idea what you can do for us!"

"Perhaps you will after we've had a talk," said the doctor, with a smile.

CHAPTER XLVI.

RAYMOND LOVELL, having telegraphed beforehand for rooms, ran down to Aylesbury the evening before the trial.

Miss Mackenzie, Beatrice Ashley, and Lady Gerda Staunton were all in the same hotel, the latter having been placed under the little old maid's chaperonage by the Marquis, who was always glad to shift a disagreeable job on to other shoulders.

"There's Fitzmaur!" exclaimed Lady Gerda, breathlessly, as she stepped out of a first-class carriage at the railway station. The sight of her lost brother roused her effectually from her self-absorption, and she stood still, with parted lips, waiting for him to recognise her.

Bitter was her disappointment when his eyes met hers with the sternest glance she had ever seen in them, and, merely raising his hat, he passed on without a word.

She said nothing, but Merton stretched out her arms in alarm, thinking that her mistress was going to fall. But Lady Gerda promptly recovered herself, and looking neither to right nor left stepped into the carriage which was waiting for her.

Her aristocratic figure, enveloped in a light grey dust cloak attracted much attention, for the report of her beauty had travelled much

further than Buckinghamshire, and she was also known to be one of the principal witnesses in the Paget case.

"A splendid woman!" remarked one young barrister, who had come down by the same train, "but I expect the solution of the enigma lies in a nutshell. Paget wasn't killed by anyone, but he died of the thought of marrying her."

"Rot!" cried another, indignantly. "I should only be too glad to have the chance. She is magnificent—a real heroine!"

"Yes, a second Lady Macbeth. Not a pleasant sort of wife for a peaceable man."

"They say that Lovell's head over ears."

"Lovell's got enough on his hands without that. If he's in love with anyone it's with the girl he's got to defend," the barrister asserted with the confidence of ignorance. "I doubt if he will last out to the end. We shall have a scene in court, and the leading counsel will be missing."

"Whew! I hope not, because Smith would be certain to make a mess of it. I'm sure it's time to feed. Let us go and get some dinner."

The two went off, and the idlers on the platform dispersed, one and all taking with them some new piece of information about the Paget case.

The desertion of her brother seemed like the last blow to Lady Gerda. She could eat nothing at dinner except a fragment of fried sole; and soon afterwards, being utterly worn out in body and mind, and quite incapable of joining in the conversation, she bade Miss Mackenzie and Beatrice good-night, and retired to her own rooms.

On the staircase she came face to face with Raymond Lovell, and seemed as taken aback as if she had seen a ghost.

He looked startled out of his usual composure, and was conscious of a strange wish to pass on without a word. Conquering this he said, gravely,—

"I did not know that you had taken rooms here. Can I be of any service to you?"

"None at all, thanks," panting as if suddenly short of breath. "I am dead tired, and want nothing but rest."

"You look as if you needed it," looking down into her wan face with a pang of bitter pain which shot through his heart like the point of a two-edged knife. "I can't help you, can I? You don't want to speak to me, I know," he said, hurriedly. "To-morrow—to-morrow, what will you say when you see her?"

"The same as I said before," drawing herself up, though there was still that frightened look in her eyes. "And you will save her! Oh! if you do, Raymond," clasping her hands, "ask me what you will, and I will do it!"

He laid his hand upon her arm and drew her inside the small sitting-room which adjoined her bed-room.

"Do you mean what you say?" he asked, hoarsely, whilst his eyes looked like two living coals. "If I save Cora Paget do you mean that you would be my wife?"

"Yes, a thousand times yes," with a catch in her breath which sounded like a sob.

"Gerda, you madden me," putting his hand to his forehead.

"No, no, you are so wise, your head is so strong; it is my poor brain that is falling. Oh! Raymond, I'm so lonely, so deserted; even my own brother has cast me off," and she looked up into his face with imploring eyes.

Was it a wonder that, confused and bewildered and over-strung, with her lovely face so near him that he could feel her breath upon his cheek, he yielded to the charm which had always been stronger for him than any other, and stretching out his arms he drew her towards him with passionate tenderness, and pressed his eager lips upon hers.

One minute of mad, inebriating joy, and then, "Heaven help us both!" he cried, and placing her gently on the sofa, rushed from the room like a madman!

Lord Fitzmaur, meanwhile, had not been idle. Armed with a special order from the Home Secretary, he jumped into a hansom, and caused himself to be driven at a rapid pace to Aylesbury Gaol.

After some demur he was taken to the cell where he had last seen Cora. At the sight of her a sob rose in his chest, and he grasped her small hand so tight that she drew it back with an expression of pain.

"Why have you come? I told you to keep away," she said, in a low voice, as if she had not the strength to raise it higher.

"Don't be angry with me. Since I saw you I've been to America to find Warner, and I've brought him back with me."

"What a lot of trouble to take for me!"

"No trouble would have been too great. Do you know that for your sake I've quarrelled with Gerda, and cut myself off from my home?" looking down at her with earnest eyes. "I am going to carve out a new line for myself, and I want you to give me a promise."

"Don't ask me anything. I've done with the world," sitting down on the one wooden chair.

"But you must. Cannot you leave us alone for one single moment?" turning fiercely on the warder, whose presence he began to feel an intolerable restraint.

"No, my lord; there's my orders, and break them I can't," said the man, firmly.

"Not if I make it worth your while?" showing him the edge of a bank-note.

"Not if you was to promise me the Bank of England," with grave decision.

Lord Fitzmaur turned from him with an angry frown.

"He is quite right," said Cora, gently. "He is only doing his duty."

"Yes, but duty is often the most aggravating thing upon earth. You must know what has brought me here?" his eyes softening like his voice. "Cora, I have but one hope in life, and that is that you will be my wife!"

"Are you mad?" she asked, with startled eyes.

"No—most sane in this! I'm not worthy of you, I know—not half good enough, but you will raise me to a higher level. Only promise to be my wife, and I shall be able to endure the horror of to-morrow without losing my head entirely."

"Lord Fitzmaur," she said, with grave dignity, "this is no time for joking—"

"On my soul and honour I never was more serious in my life!" his voice trembling with agitation.

"I refused you long ago—before this awful blight fell upon me. I would not accept any man now," with a shudder, "if I loved him with the whole of my heart."

"But it is now that you must. I want my belief in your innocence to be published to-morrow to the four winds of Heaven."

"Ah! I see your motive—compassion again!" turning away.

"Nothing of the sort," he said, vehemently.

"I want the whole world to know that the Lady Fitzmaur of the future was backed up against this monstrous charge by all who had ever known her. I want them to see the folly and absurdity of it almost before the trial begins. Isn't it true that all Oriol Paget's friends are gathering round you? His own special friend defends you; the old lady and Beatrice Ashley, who knew him all his life, are here in Aylesbury, ready to take you to their home directly this mockery is over. And when they hear that I, who was to be his own brother-in-law, am engaged to be married to you, don't you think that fact will be enough to convince them at once?"

"Oh, stop—stop! I can't bear it!" putting her hands to her temples. "They all loved him—but not so much as I!"

Lord Fitzmaur winced, but his tone was very gentle.

"He was a man whom anyone could love, and nothing would distress him so much as to

see you left to fight your battles alone. You won't know what to do with your life. Give it to me, and help to keep me straight!"

"I've no thought or care about anything. I only want to die!" she said, dreadingly.

"But I'll take you away from all these loathsome memories—take you to America, where we can begin a new life together. Oh, child, listen to me!" his voice vibrating with intense earnestness. "I've been a sinner, but I'd give it all up. I'd give up anything on earth you didn't like. Only let me say—"

"Say anything—only leave me!" leaning her head against the hard wall, and hardly knowing what he was talking about. Her head was confused, her brain felt bewildered, her only prayer at the moment was to be left—not in peace, for that she thought was gone for ever—but at least to think her bitter thoughts alone.

"Time's up, my lord," said the warder.

"Good-bye, my darling!" whispered Lord Fitzmaur, bending over that small white face, which went to his heart in its utter misery, as no other face of woman had ever done before.

"Would to Heaven I could take your place to-morrow, and bear it all instead of you!"

There was no answer. The long silken lashes rested darkly on the pallid cheeks, and all colour had gone from the beautiful lips.

He could not be quite sure whether she heard him or not, but being once more urged to depart by the warder, he went softly from the gloomy cell, his heart nearly bursting with his passionate love.

"Not another night shall my darling pass in this horrible place!" he said to himself, as he looked up at the gloomy building; and then, tearing a leaf out of a pocket-book, he wrote on it a few hasty lines before getting into a cab.

He drove straight to the hotel where Lovell was staying, and giving the note to a waiter, told him to deliver it at once into Mr. Lovell's hands. Then he paid the driver, and made up his mind to walk to the inn where he had engaged a room, hoping that exercise would help to quiet his brain.

Raymond was astonished to hear that he was to give out the next day that Cora Paget was engaged to the Earl of Fitzmaur, not knowing that her consent had been simply taken for granted from her hasty exclamation, "Oh, say anything!" when she could scarcely collect her thoughts.

"The plot thickens," he said to himself, with a bitter smile, as he pushed the hair back from his burning forehead. "What would they say at the Bar if they only knew!"

But nobody knew what a fearful struggle was passing through his heated brain as he paced his room—love, mad, bewildering and overpowering, was in arms against duty and conscience, and the two latter were fighting stubbornly before yielding.

He threw himself on his bed at last, worn-out, but wide-awake, fearing to prejudice his client's cause if he got no rest. Oh, that doubt—that horrible doubt—which had come to him like a whisper from hell! There was nothing to set it at rest but certainty, and certainty, brave man as he had always been, he had not the courage to face. And yet he was bound in honour to do his utmost to prove the accused innocent, and in a moment of madness he had tied himself irrevocably to that other girl, about whose lovely head the doubt was clinging like an evil serpent!

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE fifteenth of August dawned as brightly as any of its predecessors, as Raymond Lovell walked through the gathering crowd to the House of Sessions. The struggle that he had passed through had left its mark upon him. There were white threads amongst the thick dark hair, deep lines on the broad white brow.

Nothing could destroy the chiselled perfection of feature; but through the work of the last few weeks he had lost the beauty of youth for ever. He looked neither to right nor left. Friends passed him unnoticed. He did not even see the people through whom he was elbowing his way, though many recognised him as the leading counsel for the defence, and looked after him eagerly.

A carriage drove up just before him, and in the doorway he met Lady Gerda, looking dazzlingly fair in her sable surroundings. At the sight of her he turned deadly white, averted his eyes, and went on without a word.

The court was crowded in every nook and corner, but he made his way to his seat without waiting to speak to anyone. When he had reached it he pulled out the papers he had brought in his pocket, and spread them out before him, keeping his eyes resolutely fixed on the written words, as a hint to other men not to disturb him.

He saw not a word of the writing, however, for between his eyes and the blue paper came a beautiful face, whose pleading glance he had ever felt it utterly impossible to resist. Would it be fatal to him as the mermaids of old, who lured men downward to death and ruin by a resistless smile?

A sudden stoppage of busy tongues told him that the judge had taken his place on the bench, followed by the sheriffs in their knee-breeches and silk stockings, and he knew by the movement of all heads in one direction that a slight girlish figure must have entered the dock.

He drew a deep breath, and summoned all the powers of his will and intellect, for he knew that the supreme moment of his life had come. More than the tragic issues of life and death were hanging on his work that day, and if he failed, disaster would spread round him in an ever-widening circle.

A strange feeling came over him that all this was a dream, and when he spoke he felt that it was somebody else taking his voice and speaking for him.

The preliminaries were arranged after an exasperating delay, and the court settled down to business.

Belated barristers had to force their way through an impatient crowd. Whilst the reporters left off chaffing and snatched up their pens, and the jurymen, one and all, assumed a martyr-like expression.

At the first sight of the girl's beautiful face and weary eyes almost every man, and most of the women went over to the accused.

Cora Paget was dressed in deep mourning, and the first bonnet she had ever worn was tied closely under her soft, white chin.

Her attire was as simple as possible, but nothing could take from the charm of her youthful grace, or from the beauty of the sad face.

There was a suggestion of passion and suppressed strength to those who were near enough to see how closely the small white teeth were set, and the delicate nostrils quivered; but to those in the distance it seemed as if she had got beyond the province of feeling—beyond the susceptibilities of flesh and blood, and had gradually stiffened into cold, unresponsive marble.

"Ain't she bold!" whispered a girl in her friend's ear. "With all them eyes fixed upon me I should be as red as a lobster."

"Poor young thing, she's got something else to think of besides blushing!" said the woman, gently.

And then all whisperings were hushed, for Sergeant Mitchell stood up to make his speech.

The advocate for the prosecution was a medium-sized man, with broad shoulders and an ugly, though powerful, face.

He told his story with the lucidity for which he was famous, and his cold, unimpassioned sentences had a sobering effect on the surrounding excitement.

He never raised his voice to a higher pitch than usual, except when he wanted to impress

a particular point on the minds of the jury; and, as his speech went on—cold, calm, and deadly as a dose of poison—to his last words, Raymond, whose nerves were strung to the utmost limit of tension, felt his heart die in his breast.

For the first time Cora saw herself as she appeared to the eyes and minds of all these strangers, who only knew enough of her life to condemn it.

The violent temper, which she knew to be her curse, the frantic jealousy which she thought she had hidden from the eyes of all the world, were dragged out into the light of day.

She, whose whole life had been wrapped up in that of her cousin, was represented as counting on the chance of succeeding to the property, as trying to prevent his marriage for fear lest he should have children to inherit the estate, and, when all her efforts had failed, driven to desperation by the announcement that he was going to alter his will, she was said to have stolen downstairs in the middle of the night, and to have poured a stealthy dose of poison into his glass of whisky-and-water!

There was motive enough to make the crime probable, for only one life stood between the accused and a valuable property; and no other theory as to the young Baronet's death was tenable.

He was found dead in his chair by that same library table, with the will spread out before him, and a glass containing a few drops of whisky-and-water, mixed with *laudanum*, was standing by his side!

It had been suggested that the deceased committed suicide, but there was not an iota of evidence to support the absurd idea.

Sir Oriel Paget was in the prime of life, without a debt or a care in the world, possessor of a fine estate, and of an income computed at thirty thousand pounds a year.

He was on the eve of marriage with the charming daughter of one of the proudest houses in England.

His life lay before him as a sunny path, without a thorn or a shadow, and he was the last man in England to cut it short by his own hand.

The *laudanum* that was found in his glass and on his lips was brought into the room by his cousin!

The phial was sworn to by George Rodney, the footman, who saw it in the prisoner's hand, and his evidence was corroborated by another, Lady Gerda Staunton, who was to have been the Baronet's bride.

The learned sergeant went on to explain about the cheque which Rodney had left on the table in the hall, and which gave him the opportunity of witnessing that clandestine visit to the library, and detailed how Lady Gerda's attention had been roused by a step passing her door.

When the whole story was told, and the advocate for the prosecution sat down with a complacent expression on his clever face, the most impartial man in court could not see a loophole for the prisoner.

Men and women looked at her, and wondered that sin could appear in so beautiful a guise.

It seemed to shock the men in their sense of right that their own daughters or wives, highly respectable and eminently virtuous as they were, would look like common clay compared with porcelain if set beside the murderers.

The hands which could hold that phial of *laudanum* ought to be differently formed to those which were clasped so tightly in the girl's lap.

The head which could conceive so ghastly a deed ought not to have been shaped so daintily, or endowed with such feminine grace.

"Oh, Heaven! she must be saved!" Raymond Lovell cried in his innermost self.

If it was so dreadful for him, what must it

be for the girl herself, who, added to the fear and intolerable shame, had the misery of losing the one man on whom her passionate heart was set!

He turned round involuntarily, and for an instant their eyes met.

That heart-breaking glance he carried with him to the end of his life, and never thought of without a shudder.

It was a wild and hunted look, as of a creature driven to the last limit of endurance—such as a martyr might have given when bones had been broken and flesh torn by the wheel of torture, and faith in that hour of anguish had begun to fail—a look that a woman could scarcely wear but once in her life before reason gave way, and the end was a madhouse!

Raymond writhed with the sense of utter powerlessness as one witness after the other stepped into the box and gave evidence against an innocent girl; but he never missed a point, and was as sharp as a needle in cross examination.

And so the hours dragged on, and the heat of the crowded court became unbearable.

Men wiped their foreheads, lawyers pushed back their wigs, women fanned themselves, but no one went away, because of the interest which bound them to their seats.

When at last there was an interval for luncheon most of the public were unwilling to move, but the barristers went out in a great hurry.

Lovell alone sat still, till Serjeant Mitchell himself went up to him, and tapping him on the shoulder, advised him to be quick, or the judge would be back before he had finished his bottle of "*cham*."

Raymond started, then with a slow smile got up rather like a man in a dream, and went out after the rest.

It was not his habit to drink champagne in the middle of the day, but he called for some, hoping that it might give him more courage to face the moment when Lady Gerda should stand in the box.

When he came back he glanced round the court for the first time, and saw that numbers of personal friends of Sir Oriel Paget—men whom he had often met at Wray Hall or in Lowndes-square—had come to Aylesbury to find out the secret of his death.

Some were accommodated with seats on the bench, others were crowded up amongst the general public, and all were evidently ready to listen with the closest attention.

Would any of them be sharp enough to find out the flaw which had struck him first in Grosvenor-street, and guess the part he was playing?

Their presence made him uneasy, but he soon forgot all lookers-on in the absorbing interest of his task, as Lady Gerda, tall, stately, but white as death, stepped into the witness-box.

The learned Serjeant handled her very gently, for he saw that it was only by a supreme effort of will that she managed to bear up sufficiently to give her evidence at all.

Not once did she look towards the dock, as in a low, measured tone she answered every question.

She was a witness for the prosecution, as poor Mason had been forced to be before her, but there was a subtle change in the tone of her answers, and whenever it was possible she added a few words here and there to the prisoner's advantage.

This notably occurred when she was in the hands of the counsel for the defence. By the power of his will he seemed to make her frame her answers as he chose, lest he should bring out the one fatal question which even then was trembling on his lips.

Some power over which he was losing control seemed about to force the words from him which would have staggered all in the court.

With all the strength of his will he could scarcely keep them back. Cold drops of per-

spiration gathered on his forehead, the hunted look which had struck him in the prisoner's eyes came to his, and to save himself and another from betrayal he sat down abruptly, and so concluded his cross-examination.

For Lady Gerda the ordeal had been equally trying, for there in the court she saw her brother, who hated her for every admission she was obliged to make which helped to incriminate Cora Paget.

It is no wonder that after having just passed through such a tempest of emotion, Lovell's opening speech was a disappointment to those who had been pinning their faith on it.

Lord Fitzmaur only wished that he could take his wig and gown, and speak for him, feeling certain that although he had no opinion of his own powers of oratory, with such a theme to inspire him, he would be certain to rise to an eloquence that he had never known before.

When the court rose at seven o'clock the examination of the witnesses for the defence was not finished, and the trial was adjourned to another day.

CHAPTER. XLVIII.

"ANOTHER night for my darling in that loathsome gaol."

Lord Fitzmaur groaned at the thought of it as he stood outside in the starlight, doing no good to himself or the prisoner, but feeling that it would be disloyal to keep away.

The most startling fact in Lovell's speech that day had been the announcement of his engagement to Cora Paget. It had made his own friends stare, but she herself had only given her head a little scornful shake, as if she scarcely thought the statement worth refuting.

To a girl within appreciable distance of the gallows or at least of life-long penal servitude, an engagement of any kind would naturally seem of little weight, and it probably passed out of her mind as soon as the speech was finished.

Another night of intolerable doubt and suspense for Raymond Lovell, of conflict and distracted warfare with his own higher instincts.

He had always been a strictly honourable man, ready to sacrifice himself in an instant for a scruple of conscience, but now the position was different. If he spoke out the horrible doubt that was in his own mind, suspicion would be thrown on a third person, her reputation, her very life jeopardised, when after all she might be as perfectly guiltless as Cora Paget; but if he secreted the doubt in his own breast and kept silence on the one point that was more important than any other, he might condemn Cora herself to death or lifelong imprisonment.

Towards morning he fell into the sound sleep of utter exhaustion and woke refreshed. Strong in the strength of a new resolution he felt that he had fresh courage to face the difficulties of the day.

In the privacy of his own room he had knelt down and prayed his Almighty Father to bless his efforts, and he felt a new confidence in the issue.

Yesterday he felt that he must succeed in order that three people at the least should be saved from despair; to-day he thought that victory should be his because of the justice of his cause.

There was a certain amount of brightness in his eyes, and his resolute bearing gave some comfort to Alick Armstrong, Mason, Stapley, and others who were heart and soul for the defence.

The court was, if possible, more crowded than on the day before, and every avenue was choked.

In spite of the efforts of the ushers the barristers had almost to fight their way to their places, and their clerks had a hard time of it for a few minutes.

The buzz of conversation subsided into profound silence and the trial began afresh.

The witnesses for the defence were not very numerous, and their evidence did not strike the public as of sufficient weight until Beatrice Ashley was called.

Her sweet face was very pale, but she exercised the greatest self-control, and kept down all sign of emotion, possibly because she, like Lady Gerda, kept her eyes averted from the dock.

She quite remembered that Sir Oriol had complained of toothache at dinner, and that his cousin had promised to bring him a remedy. So far from always quarrelling, he and his cousin were the best of friends, just like brother and sister, and they had had a long talk together after dinner on that last evening.

Sir Oriol had been in low spirits during the day, being, as she thought, much upset by an unfounded report in the *Univers* concerning Lady Gerda Staunton.

During the evening he was not like himself, but she had left in a hurry, and did not know what had happened afterwards.

Just as her examination concluded, she raised her eyes, and met Cora's. The sight of her dearly-loved friend in such an awful position utterly upset her composure. The fear and the horror of it all overcame her, and clutching the rail in front of her, she stared with a horrified stare at the sea of faces before her, which seemed to move like the shifting surges; and then, with a choking sob, sank down as if crushed by a blow.

They carried her out, and women cried, and men felt uncomfortable, and Lovell's face grew stern, as if it were cast in iron.

Dr. Warner was the trump card for the defence. He could prove beyond doubt that the deceased was suffering from a dangerous form of heart disease.

He had warned him to refrain from all active exercise, such as cricket, dancing, or lawn-tennis, and to guard against every excitement.

He pooh-poohed the inferences drawn from the post-mortem. The laudanum had been found in the glass of whisky and water—a slight discoloration from it on the lips of the deceased, but scarcely a trace of it in his body. If he had died from the effects of it a certain amount must have been found in the stomach, whereas all the symptoms proved belonged to heart disease, and not to poison.

He entered into a scientific explanation, which has no place here, and asserted that the paragraph in the *Univers* was sufficient to bring on the disturbance of the heart, which was likely to cause death.

In conclusion, he gave it as his opinion that Sir Oriol Paget's death was due to heart disease, which he had inherited from his father and grandfather, and not to any foreign cause.

The small phial of laudanum he identified as one that he himself had given to Miss Paget when suffering from a severe attack of toothache. He had advised her to hold a weak solution in her mouth when the pain was violent; and he thought it most natural that she should have given the same prescription to her cousin.

The doctor's evidence produced a good impression, but Sergeant Mitchell did his best to demolish it, relying, as was natural, on that of Dr. White and the other surgeon who had assisted at the post-mortem.

The silence was breathless as Raymond Lovell rose in his place to address the court for the last time.

The heat was overpowering, but fans ceased to flutter in feminine hands, and men left off mopping their brows, and every eye was fixed on the pale, resolute face of the counsel for the defence. Carefully, and with judgment, he gathered together every piece of evidence that could tell in the accused's favour, and pointed out the logical inference:

"Sir Oriol Paget and his cousin, brought up under the same roof, thrown together in every pursuit, playing the same childish games,

taking long rides under the forest trees, boating during the hot summer days on the river or the lake, starting for a meet in the struggling daylight of a winter's morning, coming back in the early dusk—always together, summer or winter, in town or country—was it a wonder that they grew to love each other like brother and sister? Sir Oriol's engagement made no difference in their affection.

"It was to Miss Paget that he appealed to look after the works he had begun on his estate; it was to her care that he entrusted his tenants, because he knew that she had been an angel of mercy to the sick and the sorrowful amongst his tenants. And it is this girl, to whom every man, woman, or child, about Wray Hall looked up with affection and respect, who is accused of stealing downstairs in the dead of night to murder the man whom she had loved like a brother, in order to gain so many thousands in the funds, so many acres of land, which no one dares to say she was ever known to covet, and which I could take my oath were of no value to her, so long as this life-long friend, cousin, and brother, was no longer there to share them with her!

"Could any charge be more monstrous, absurd, or cruel? Too much had been made of a paltry quarrel such as might occur amongst the members of any family almost every day. It was not enough to keep his cousin away from him when she knew he was suffering. I look at that small phial of laudanum, not as an instrument of heartless, dastardly murder, but as a proof of tender womanliness. It was the remedy she had promised him, and might form the basis for a reconciliation.

"George Rodney says he heard no voices, and the inference was drawn by the other side that Sir Oriol was asleep; but the gentlemen of the jury must bear in mind that the footman, by his own account, was still hidden by a curtain, and that a girl's soft pleadings for forgiveness would scarcely penetrate through the thick oaken door of the library at Wray Hall.

"There was no quarrel, for the door was closed gently. Quietly as people generally walk in the middle of the night, when the rest of the household are asleep, Miss Paget went back to her room.

"When the alarm was given the next morning, she was the only one of the ladies who rushed downstairs, and her first inquiry was if Sir Oriol had been told. And then, when she saw him, lying cold and stiff, with the greyness of death on the young, handsome face, did she shrink like a murderer from the sight of her victim?—did she go and hide herself in the darkest corner of that large house? No; with a cry that went to the hardest heart there, she flung herself down in broken-hearted grief, and buried her face on his breast!"

A sound like a smothered sob broke from many in that crowd of men and women, and the girl in the dock shook like a leaf. She could bear abuse, scorn, contempt, but not sympathy. She could bear to be vilified as a murderer, but not to have the tenderest secrets of her heart exposed to the public gaze.

Lovell's words were like fire playing on an unhealed scar. She shrank and shivered; but after all Oriol was dead—dead, dead, and nothing mattered much!

Raymond Lovell's voice rang out as a trumpet, as he claimed justice—simple justice for an innocent girl. He spoke with a force and conviction as if he had had seen the young Baronet die before his eyes, and with an eloquence which carried all before it as on an irresistible wave.

It was as if his own life hung in the balance, as his cheeks glowed, and his eyes shone like fire, whilst torrents of tears ran down women's cheeks, and men sat listening with bated breath, thrilled as they had never been thrilled before. When the last word was said, the supreme effort over, and he sat down, amidst a burst of applause, which was promptly checked, the hand which held the handkerchief, with which he wiped the cold dew from his forehead,

trembled like a woman's, and for a moment the whole court swam before his eyes.

The judge's summing up was like slow torture to his excited brain, for he felt like a builder who had spent all his strength on raising an edifice, which was being ruthlessly pulled down, brick by brick.

To the prisoner it was as if he were not speaking, for she had got beyond the power of listening, and could scarcely hang upon her chair.

Then the jury were asked if they wished to retire to consider their verdict. Lovell listened breathlessly, feeling that all the effect of his speech would be lost if they once went out of the court before deciding. The foreman said there was no necessity, as they were all of one mind.

A pause of a minute, which seemed like ten, and the clerk of the court asked what the verdict was. In a loud voice, which rang through the silent agony of suspense, the foreman answered, "Not Guilty!" and a murmur of relief ran from mouth to mouth. Then there was a cry, as the counsel for the defence fell forward on his face; whilst Cora Paget bowed gravely to the judge, and walked away as if the fear of death had scarcely touched her, and she were still in a dream.

(To be continued.)

NOVELLETTE—continued.)

HIS TENANT'S DAUGHTER.

—30—

CHAPTER VII.

THE UNEXPECTED.

BREAKFAST is usually a very pleasant meal at Boecombe Castle.

Sir Denbigh Rivers is one of the best tempered men in the county. He likes cheerful faces about him, and he very closely follows the advice of the poet who writes:—

"In colours let thy soul be dressed—not crape."

But this morning there is a cloud upon the worthy Baronet's brow, and from his occasionally impatient glances at his wife Ina, known well that it is her stepmother who has brought it there.

This is so. My lady has been talking very seriously to her husband about Thurston's admiration for sweet Margaret Earl, and has expressed her opinion pretty strongly that unless something is done at once to nip this flower of love in the bud, very disagreeable complications will speedily ensue.

Her husband has been impatient and sceptical, accusing her of making mountains of molehills, and ungratefully asserting that she is always imagining vain things; but, for all that, her words have disquieted him, and his son's unusual thoughtfulness this morning goes far to confirm the suspicions expressed by his wife.

Ina, however, is cheerful enough. She and Percy Haberton keep up a lively conversation in which Lady Rivers occasionally joins, and Thurston's mind is too much engrossed with his intended visit to Cedar Cottage to observe that his father is as silent as himself.

Presently Sir Denbigh startles his son by saying,—

"Thurston, I want you to go with me to Exeter this morning."

"I'm very sorry, father, but I can't go this morning," is the prompt reply. "This afternoon, or any other day, if you will give me a few hours' notice."

Lady Rivers does not venture to glance at her husband; otherwise her eyes would say—plainly as eyes could speak,—

"I told you so."

But her husband knows by intuition what is passing through her mind, and this drives him to say, sarcastically,—

"I didn't know your time was so much occupied, Thurston!"

"Nor is it usually, sir," is the quietly, resolute reply; "but this morning I cannot go with you."

There is silence for a few seconds. The father will not condescend to ask "why cannot you come with me?" The son does not volunteer any explanation. Ina will not question her brother, and Lady Rivers feels that it will be the worst policy in the world for her to do so.

Mentally, she resolves to find out what is Thurston's engagement this morning. But now she comes to his rescue in the most charming and easy manner possible.

She changes the conversation, talks about their dogs and horses, then calls her husband's attention to a particular bed of plants in the small sub-tropical garden upon which the breakfast-room opens.

As soon as the meal is over a servant brings my lady's garden hat and cloak, and she and Sir Denbigh walk out into this garden, where the air is mild and balmy.

She takes her husband's arm, and for a few seconds they walk side by side in silence.

Presently she remarks,—

"He is going to the cottage this morning to propose; I am sure of it. That rose yesterday was the prelude. His refusal to go with you this morning is conclusive."

"And suppose you are right, what am I to do?" demands the Baronet, angrily.

He hated to be "badgered" in this fashion, and, like all good-tempered men when driven too unmercifully, he is apt to turn upon his tormentor.

Lady Rivers shrugs her shoulders before she replies,—

"I know what I would do if he were my son."

"But he isn't your son!" retorts her husband; "and if you begin to interfere he'll take the bit between his teeth. You know he is of age, and practically independent of me!"

"I was not thinking of trying to influence him," replies her ladyship, softly. "It was the girl and her father whom I would try to get out of the way."

"There, that will do!" raps out Sir Digby, sharply. "We'll talk about something else. What's the meaning of that man over yonder being in my park; it's a closed day, too. Send a servant to tell him he's trespassing, will you, my dear? and I'm going to smoke. I expect my steward at ten. Confound the fellow!"

Lady Rivers takes the hint. She perfectly understands that her husband will not allow her to interfere with his son, but she is determined, if possible, to find out what his engagement is this morning. Not such an easy matter as she imagines, however.

Ina and Percy are chatting away pleasantly together when she re-enters the house, but Thurston is not with them, and, in answer to her inquiry, his sister says she does not know where he has gone.

"It doesn't matter," remarks her ladyship, quietly. "But you will have to amuse yourself this morning, my dear. I have to spend a full hour with the housekeeper, and I must walk up to the poultry-yard; our table is never well supplied unless I keep Corby up to the mark."

Ina says she can easily do this, and then her step mother goes to the housekeeper's room, from whence she can distinctly see the carriage drive and a narrow footpath, which ascends the steep hill which will lead to the north lodge—the one that stands almost opposite the entrance to Cedar Cottage.

It is close to this lodge that the poultry-yard, or farm, is kept—the gate-keeper being likewise poultry-man; and now, when her ladyship says she is going there, she means that she is going to a spot from whence she will be able to see anybody who enters or who leaves Captain Earl's house.

Just as she has finished giving her orders to her housekeeper, she perceives her stepson ascending the steep path to the north lodge, and she thinks, rather bitterly,—

"He is like the lover in the fairy tale who galloped over the road that was paved with gold, seeing nothing of its beauty, thinking only of the lady of his choice. I wonder what the end will be? I don't feel at all like a wicked stepmother, but it is my duty to put a stop to this affair if I can."

Meanwhile, Thurston Rivers is ascending the hillside with quick, eager steps; but strong of limb and sound of wind as he is, it is a good pull, and when he reaches a path which skirts the hill about half-way up, he pauses and looks back, wondering, as he has often done before, what could have possessed his ancestor to build an imposing castle at the bottom of a deepcombe.

"Buried," he muses; "but we shan't spend all our lives here, lovely as it is. While the dear old governor lives we'll travel about and see the world. Maggie will enjoy it, I'm sure. How her face lighted up with delight the other day when her father told her that he would one day take her to Vienna! But I shall be a much more interesting companion than he if she only thinks so."

He smiles as he makes this proviso, for though he is nervous and anxious as to what Maggie's answer to his suit may be, deep down in his heart he feels almost sure that she loves him.

Almost—not quite.

Sometimes, when he has gazed into the depths of her dark brown eyes and feasted on the lovely face, he has felt that she must love him; has felt that his own deep, earnest love must have power and intensity enough in its own nature to awaken a responsive echo in the maiden's breast; but he cannot recall word or glance from her which will warrant him in saying even to his own heart "She loves me."

But youth is sanguine, and he hopes everything.

That Maggie likes him he is quite assured, and if she does not love him now she probably will love him when she knows that his happiness is in her hands.

Of the rash imprudence of the step he is now taking he is well aware.

Percy Haberton has enlarged upon the subject again and again and again, and Thurston has replied in tones of mockery or of jest. Once, indeed, the young men almost came to a quarrel over Thurston's infatuation, and though they shook hands afterwards as friends, Percy felt that expostulation from him was worse than useless; and resolved, henceforth, to confine his prudence to his own affairs.

For a little while after this Thurston became more reasonable, but the sight yesterday afternoon of Lord Melcombe doing his best to win Maggie's attention drove all his sober resolutions to the wind, and now he is determined, whether his family like it or not, to woo and win her.

As he ascends the long, steep hill, with quick, buoyant step, he pictures to himself the fair girl whom he loves, with blushing cheeks and drooping eyes, waiting for him, and he has already, in imagination, clasped her warm breathing form in his arms and kissed those white waxen eyelids, while she half hides from him her rosy lips, when, thus pleasantly dreaming he enters the gate of Cedar Cottage, and finds himself in the presence of Maggie's father.

"Good morning, Mr. Rivers!" says Captain Earl, gravely.

The tenant of Cedar Cottage is rarely anything but grave, and the appearance of the young Squire in his garden at this early hour, coupled with certain trifles in his daughter's dress this morning, and possibly connected with a certain tremulousness and but half-concealed agitation in her manner, which had not escaped his observation, now suggest an idea that is distinctly unwelcome to him; and, with ruthless hand, he determines, if any love-sick folly exists between these young people, to extinguish it at once.

Oddly enough, Thurston Rivers had thought

carefully enough about the opposition of his own family, but he had not entertained the idea of any serious objection from Captain Earl; and even now, with the soldier's eye fixed sternly upon him, he only supposes that he will withhold his consent until Sir Denbigh's is won.

Thurston has returned the other's greeting; together they have exchanged some remarks about the weather; and then there is silence. The Captain is too courteous to ask what brings his visitor here, but that he has come with some distinct purpose in his mind he is firmly convinced.

"Is Miss Earl quite well?" the young man asks, at length.

"Quite well, thank you!"

"Is she in?"

"Yes."

But there is no movement on the father's part to lead the way into the house; and Thurston, who thinks he can catch a glimpse of Maggie through the drawing-room window, at last asks desperately,—

"Can I see her?"

"Does she expect you?" is the disconcerting question, which makes the young man's face flush crimson, though he answers bravely

"Yes!"

"Then you had better not see her!" is the grave reply; "unless," he adds, courteously, "you bring a message from your mother or your sister!"

The hot blood that had rushed over the face of Thurston Rivers recedes again, and leaves him deadly pale.

Captain Earl's manner is calm, courteous, and determined. He is clearly within his right to refuse to allow this young man to talk with his daughter alone, and to come to visit her by appointment as he has now done; but his prompt decision is not what the son of a rich man would anticipate at the beginning of his wooing; and, for a second or two, young Rivers scarcely knows what to say or do.

If he were one whit less in love with Maggie than he is Thurston would exclaim,—

"Very well, sir!" and fling himself out of the garden more quickly than he entered it; but he is in love—honestly, desperately in love—and the suspicion enters his mind that his stepmother is at the bottom of his present discomfort.

The greatness of the prize at stake, and the determination not to be coerced by his father's wife, enables him to put a curb upon his fiery temper; and, after a momentary pause, in which he mentally pulls himself together, he says, nervously,—

"Perhaps I ought first to have asked your permission to address your daughter, Captain; but, believe me, I should have come to you and begged your consent to our union as soon as I was sure that Maggie would accept me."

"You are an honourable man, sir!" responds Captain Earl, with more warmth than he generally shows; "and I am only sorry that circumstances compel me to refuse you for a son-in-law; but it cannot be, and the least said is soonest mended. It's no use you going and upsetting that poor fluttering bird there with talk of love and marriage that can never come to anything. Better for you, and for her too, that the matter ends here, and I will take her away for a time as soon as I can."

"But, Captain Earl, surely you are not going to send me away like this?" expostulates the young man. "You will give me some hope for the future? or some reason for this decision?"

"No; I can give you neither!" replies the soldier, sadly. "I can only tell you that it cannot be! With my consent it shall never be. I can say no more—good morning!"

"Lady Rivers is at the bottom of this!" cries Thurston, hotly.

Captain Earl regards him doubtfully for a moment, not quite taking in his meaning. His mind has been so full of his own affairs that the question of what Sir Denbigh Rivers may think of the matter has never once

occurred to him; and now he smiles, as he says calmly,—

"No! Lady Rivers knows no more about my affairs than you do. Your family has nothing to do with my decision—good morning!"

"But may I not see Maggie once, if only for a few minutes?" pleads the young man.

"May I even see her in your presence, sir?"

"No; it is better not!" is the firm reply.

"I never suspected that this would happen! You will forget all about it in a month; and she—"

He pauses; and Thurston, grown desperate with opposition, asks boldly,—

"And she?"

"She must, and shall forget it!"

Then, without another word, Captain Earl turns and walks into the house, closing the door behind him, while Thurston Rivers, maddened at the rebuff he has received, kisses his hand to Maggie, who is now standing at the drawing-room window; and, raising his clenched fist on high, while he uncovers his head, as though registering a bow in Heaven, he kisses his hand to her again, and slowly turns and retraces his steps into the Park.

Here he wanders about like a man distraught, a maddening sense of injustice upon him.

"What has he done?" he asks himself, "to be refused the privilege of declaring his love to the girl who has won his heart?"

And he can find no answer to his own demand.

Captain Earl had assumed that Maggie was willing to be won; and this was the one drop of comfort that Thurston could extract from the whole interview, as he went over it in his mind again and again.

Yes, Maggie was willing to be won, possibly her heart had been won; but why should her father so positively and emphatically assert that she must and should forget him?

Was Captain Earl ambitious for his only child? Did he think the heir of Boscombe Castle too insignificant a suitor for his daughter's hand?

The idea was preposterous; and yet what other motive could he have? for he had himself implied that his objection was not a personal one when he expressed his regret that circumstances compelled him to refuse Thurston for a son-in-law.

Circumstances? What could those circumstances be?

Had he already promised Maggie to a more favoured suitor? or had he made plans for her future which a marriage with himself would utterly upset?

This must be the case. The more he thought of what had passed between the Captain and himself this morning the more convinced he is that the former has formed some matrimonial plans for his daughter, of which she is probably quite ignorant, and the more passionately does he rebel against the decision that aims at separating him and Maggie for ever.

"But he shall not succeed! I will not give her up!" he exclaims, passionately. "Her father has no right to stand between us like this; and as for not speaking to her, I will speak to her, and to some purpose too, before many days are over our heads!"

Then he leans against the gnarled trunk of an oak tree, and half wishes that he were a woman, so that a flood of tears might come to relieve his burning brain.

But his eyes are hot and dry, he groans with mental anguish, and a footstep on the mossy grass does not rouse him.

"Thurston, is it you?" asks his father's voice, in mingled surprise and alarm.

The young man lifts his head slowly, and discloses a countenance so changed during the past two hours that Sir Denbigh utters a cry of distress. Then he asks in anxious tones,—

"What is the matter? Are you ill?"

"Yes—no," is the vague and contradictory reply.

Then he clasps his hand to his head, for he feels giddy, and several seconds elapse before he has sufficiently pulled himself together to allow his father to take his arm and lead him back to the Castle.

CHAPTER VIII.

HOW MAGGIE TAKES IT.

WHEN Margaret Earl opens her eyes on this eventful morning she is conscious of a delightful feeling of expectancy. Something unusual is going to occur, she feels very sure—something that will fill her heart with new hopes, new fears, and that will help to reconcile her to the life, which for a little longer, she is condemned to lead.

A faint, warm blush covers her cheeks, and her eyes grow soft and dreamy as she recalls the looks of love which Thurston has bent upon her yesterday, and thinks of his earnest entreaty that she will see him and listen to what he has to say when he calls this morning.

Maggie has never had a lover until now, and yet she knows full well why Thurston is coming to see her, and she has but very little doubt, in her own mind, as to what he is coming to say.

She will not allow herself to dwell upon what her answer to him shall be; that she considers a subject that can be left in the background for the present. And as she dresses her hair before the small looking-glass she smiles unconsciously, and yet with maidenly timidity, at the thought that if Thurston is given one smile of encouragement he will most certainly kiss her.

Her smile reveals a dimple in the middle of the left cheek, another at the corner of her mouth; her teeth gleam like whitest ivory between her sweet red lips, and her bright chestnut hair seems to have caught and retained a ray of the sun upon it, as she comes into the room where breakfast is already waiting, and startles her father as with a sudden revelation of her loveliness.

It happens thus sometimes with parents, with lovers, and even with friends. A face, familiar, whose beauty has been accepted as a matter of course, suddenly becomes to our vision glorified.

It may be the soul looking out of those lustrous eyes, or it may be some holy thought, some generous emotion that unexpectedly irradiates the countenance; but we must all have felt, at some time or other, particularly with those who are dear to us, that the face, ordinarily thought plain, has become beautiful, and that the acknowledged beauty has momentarily acquired greater loveliness.

Captain Earl is conscious of some such transformation this morning, and the startling conviction that his daughter is one of the most beautiful girls he has ever seen is not a pleasing one.

She is like her mother—painfully like her mother—and yet unlike. There is a certain calm dignity and repose about Margaret that her mother never possessed. She has her father's pride, her father's love of justice; and she possesses, in a marked degree, a high sense of honour, which, even in the short time she has been home from school, has agreeably surprised her parent.

Margaret greets her father with a kiss; then, as she observes that he looks at her steadily, she asks in a nervous, hesitating tone, as though she feared he was reading her heart's secret,—

"What are you thinking of, papa?"

"I was wishing that you were a boy, my dear!" he answers, with a sigh.

Then he takes his seat at the table in a dejected manner, as though fate had dealt him a hard blow in making his only child a woman.

"Indeed, papa, I don't wish I had been a boy!" asserts Maggie, promptly. "It might have been nice for some things, of course," she

adds, faintly echoing his sigh after a little reflection; "but it wouldn't be so nice for others; and, taking it all together, I'd rather be just what I am. I don't think there is any girl, even, with whom I should care to change!"

Her thoughts are with Thurston Rivers as she says this. It is of him and of his love she is thinking, not of her own physical beauty, and she is therefore startled by her father retorting, in a tone of contempt,—

"You poor, vain, little butterfly!"

"Indeed, I am not vain!" she asserts, promptly. "Indeed, I've nothing to be vain about! Ina Rivers has handsomer dresses than I, and a big house to live in, and she's ever so much better looking, but I don't envy her. If I were like her I might be vain; but, still, there are drawbacks to her position, which make me say I wouldn't change with her. I don't think that is vanity!"

"Well, well; give me my coffee," replies her father, in a tone that is not quite so unpleasant. "If I were you, poor child, I should wish I had never been born. But there is no accounting for taste."

Then, a few minutes later, with a view of changing the subject, he asks,—

"Would you like to walk down to the sea this morning?"

"No, thank you," she replies, sweetly. "I would rather stay at home!"

This is an unusual decision; and her father, who is naturally of a suspicious disposition, makes no comment upon it, but resolves to quietly observe how it is that the seashore has suddenly lost its attraction for his fair daughter.

He seems to take no notice of her occupations after the meal is over.

He and Smith have a great deal to talk about, and also much to do in the garden, with the poultry; and once or twice Maggie comes out and joins them, but invariably drifts back into the house again, reading a little, serving a little, arranging flowers, and seeming to bestow a needless amount of attention upon a half-withered rose-bud, which she has fastened in the front of her dress.

Thus it is that when Thurston Rivers opens the gate and enters the garden Captain Earl understands in an instant the cause of Maggie's restlessness, and what has brought the young Squire here.

Maggie, sitting near the drawing-room window, watching her father and lover, wonders, impatiently at first, why the latter does not come into the house.

Then, as the faces of the two gentlemen become grave—one appealing, the other evidently refusing some earnestly proffered request—she stands still, and watches them with hands clasped, with cheeks that have become pale with emotion, with lips parted in nervous eagerness.

She cannot understand it. Why should her father look so stern and grave? Why should Thurston plead so passionately, and in vain?

The explanation, as far as her lover is concerned, is clear enough, when Thurston kisses his hand to her, and mutely calling Heaven as a witness to his constancy, turns away without being able to exchange one word with her.

She does not speak, does not take one step towards the man who had come to lay his heart and his fortune at her feet.

But though she stands here, mute and almost as motionless as a statue, her heart goes out to him. She feels that he is ill-used, unfairly dealt with, in being debarred her presence, and her heart is hot with rebellion against her father, at what does undoubtedly look like an act of high-handed tyranny.

The door of the room in which she stands opens, but she does not turn her head.

She is not going to pretend that she has not seen who came into the garden and was forbidden to speak to her; but she will not question her father on the subject unless he begins it himself; and thus several minutes

elapse, during which Captain Earl paces up and down the small room preparing for the battle which he feels to be imminent, and unwilling to lose any advantage by being the first to open fire.

If ever in his life he wished that his daughter had been born a boy instead of a girl he wishes it now, as she stands there in all her marvellous young beauty—a creature who owes to him her being, but whom he can no more mould to his will than he can drive back the incoming tide, or by a word compel the winds and the waves to be still.

Captain Earl has shirked his duties as a father for more than ten years; he has left the cultivation of his daughter's mind and affection to other people. He has not lavished much love upon her, and has been quite indifferent as to her feelings towards himself; indeed, to state the matter plainly, he has regarded her as an incumbrance that cannot be shaken off, while her unfortunate resemblance to her mother makes him at times positively dislike her.

With such feelings in his own heart, how can he expect devoted love and unquestioning obedience to what is, after all, but his own arbitrary will?

Finding that Margaret will not be the first to speak he clears his voice, and says, with assumed carelessness,—

"You saw Mr. Rivers in the garden with me just now?"

"Yes, papa!" is the quiet answer.

"You expected him this morning he told me?" pursues the Captain.

"Yes. He asked me yesterday if he might call," she replies.

"And you knew why he was coming?" demands her father.

No answer; but the girl's fingers play a low tune on the table. Not a nervous tune, and nine people out of ten would not notice the movement of the fingers; but Captain Earl is the tenth. He takes the action coupled with her silence as an act of defiance, and he repeats angrily,—

"You knew why he was coming?"

Margaret lifts her glorious eyes to meet her father's steady gaze, and a slight frown contracts her fair brow as she replies,—

"To say that I know anything implies accurate knowledge! I did not know why he was coming!"

"Humph!" growls her father. "Nothing like accuracy. Well, to be brief, Mr. Rivers came to ask you to marry him, and I told him that it was impossible!"

A rose-bush mantles Margaret's fair cheek, an unconscious smile chases the frown from her brow, and wreathes her sweet lips.

Does love ever believe the impossible?

To him who loves all things are possible; and when the verb can be conjugated "I love, he loves," the stern parent who stands by and talks about the impossible might for the sake of his dignity as well save his breath.

Captain Earl becomes painfully conscious of this as he looks upon his daughter's glowing face. She is not thinking of his prohibition; she is telling herself only that Thurston Rivers loves her, that he came to ask her to be his wife, and in this ecstatic moment her own father, and even the young man's formidable stepmother, are forgotten.

The Captain loses his temper as he watches his daughter's face, and, raising his voice, he exclaims angrily,—

"Do you understand me, girl? I told him that you never could be his wife—never should be; and I sent him away, forbidding him ever to speak to you again!"

Maggie passes her hand over her brow as though the loud tone, rather than the words, oppressed her. Then, with a profound sigh, which has in it as much of pleasure as of pain, she asks,—

"Why did you tell him so? What had he done to merit such an answer?"

"The fault is not with him, it is with us!" replies her father, with a groan, and he sinks

upon a chair, and, leaning on a table close by, covers his face with his hands.

"With us!" repeats Maggie, slowly and incredulously. "What have I done?"

"You are your mother's child. Her sins are visited upon your head," is the pitiless answer.

The girl sinks upon the couch by which she stands as though she had received a blow; her head swims, the inclination to faint almost overcomes her; but she struggles against it, struggles bravely, and at length sufficiently recovers to ask,—

"Can I help being my mother's child and yours?"

"No, you cannot help it," Captain Earl replies bitterly; "neither can I, but you will have to bear the penalty. You cannot marry a man and leave him in ignorance of the wrong your mother did me; and you don't suppose, do you, that any man who did get to know it would marry you?"

"Yes; a good man would!" Maggie replies, promptly; "a good man, and one who loved me, would know that whatever my parents did could be no fault of mine; and, in any case, Thurston Rivers has a right to be told the truth."

"He has no such right!" bursts out her father, passionately. "No right whatever! Is the secret I have so carefully hidden to be told to every man who chooses to admire you? Am I to go to Sir Danbigh Rivers, and say, 'The mother of my daughter, whom your son wants to marry, was one of the vilest women who ever walked the earth? I gave her my heart—she trampled upon it. I gave her my wealth—she squandered it. I trusted her, and she deceived and dishonoured me. At length the law set me free, and I changed my name so that the finger of scorn might not be lifted against me; but because I am an honourable man I tell you this before you give your consent to the marriage!' And what do you think his answer will be? Why, he will order one of his servants to show me the door, and forbid his wife and daughter ever to speak to you again; while even his son, infatuated though he may be, would refuse to marry you!"

Margaret's face has grown very pale, while her father thus hurls his words at her; and her widely-opened eyes make the pallor more startling, but her lips are tightly drawn, and there is almost a tremor in her voice, as she asks,—

"Then what is to become of me? What do you suggest?"

Her father is surprised at what looks like ready submission, and he replies, promptly,—

"You must go away for a time until Thurston Rivers has forgotten you, or is engaged to somebody else. If need be I will go with you; but I do not see the necessity for that. You could return to your school, couldn't you?" he adds, as the idea flashes across his mind.

"Yes; I suppose I could go back to school," she says, drearily; "but what then? I can't always be at school!"

"No; certainly not!" answers her father, quickly. "As soon as young Rivers has come to his senses you can return. I have taken this house for some time, and cannot give it up!"

"But suppose Thurston does not forget me? Or suppose that any other gentleman wants to marry me? What then?" asks the girl, quietly.

"I suppose it will be the same thing over again!" he replies, gloomily.

Then, as Maggie says nothing, either in assent or objection, he asks desperately,—

"Don't you perceive that this is the only course open to me, and that marriage for you is impossible?"

"No, I do not!" she assents, looking at her father, steadily. "I do not admit the justice of visiting the sins of others upon my head. I would practise no deception, but as Thurston loves me; and as I—I love him—"

Her voice trembles, and a crimson flood

dyes her face and neck as she makes this confession; but, gathering strength, she repeats,—

"And, as I love him, I think it is due to both of us that he should be told the truth, and be allowed to act as he then thinks fit!"

"Miserable girl!" thunders her father, springing to his feet, and losing his usual calm, self-control. "You are like your miserable mother, always thinking of your own selfish desires, not of my wishes or my interest. But I was weak with her, and I will be firm enough with you. Pack up your things and be ready to start from here to-morrow morning; and, mark me, if young Rivers comes hanging about the house I forbid you to speak to him, or to hold any communication with him whatever! Do you hear me?"

"Yes; I hear," is the answer; but the brown eyes flash with indignant fire.

The ungenerous way in which she has been told she is like her erring mother has roused Maggie to active rebellion, and though she is unwilling to show disrespect to her father, she is resolved not to be coerced by him.

He reads this in her glance, and he asks, in an angry and suspicious tone,—

"And you promise to obey me?"

"No, I do not promise," she replies, firmly.

"Then you mean to defy me?" he demands, in a low tone of concentrated passion.

"No, papa; I don't wish to defy you," she answers, gently; "but when Thurston knows the truth, if he still wishes to marry me, I shall not refuse him!"

For a few seconds Captain Earl stands white with rage, his arm uplifted as though he would strike the pale, beautiful girl, who does not flinch, though the blow seems ready to descend upon her head.

The temptation to expend his rage in some deed of violence is little more than momentary. Though the rebel is his daughter she is a woman, and he controls his temper with a supreme effort, as he lowers his arm and says sternly,—

"I forbid you to leave the house to-day, and I expect you to be ready to travel with me to-morrow. If you are not I shall lock you up in your own room and keep you there."

Then, without another word, he leaves the room, and poor Maggie knows that she is, to all intents and purposes, a prisoner.

(To be continued.)

FACTS.

If you are waiting for something to turn up, just step on a barrel-hoop.

At a recent fine arts exhibition a pair of trained cattle took the prize for drawing.

The intention of fencers is, each to touch his opponent, but in this they are often foiled.

Is a man with a "hacking" cough to be reckoned in the advanced "stages" of disease?

There is a time for all things. The time to leave is when a young lady asks you whether it is raining.

An indirect way of getting a drink of water at a cheap boarding-house is to ask for a third cup of tea.

A PHYSICIAN says: "If a child does not thrive on fresh milk boil it." This is too severe. Why not spank it?

"Is anybody waiting on you?" said a polite salesman to a girl from the country. "Yes, sir," said the blushing damsel, "that's my feller outside. He wouldn't come in."

A MAN once came to an Irishman, saying: "Neighbour, I have a great need of an ass to-day; have the kindness to lend me yours."

"I have not an ass here," said the Irishman. At the same moment the animal began to bray in the stable. "Ho!" said the man. "Do I not hear your ass braying?"

"What!" exclaimed the Irishman. "Would you take the word of an ass in preference to mine?"

SOCIETY.

THE Duchess of Cumberland, whose health is now restored, will leave Vienna shortly with her children for Copenhagen, where she will stay for two months with her parents, the King and Queen of Denmark.

THE Duc d'Orleans, at last advice, preferred to remain with his shooting party, instead of joining the Sikkim field force. He enjoyed good sport, having bagged sixteen tigers beside a large amount of game. He had a narrow escape, a tigress charged his elephant, and succeeded in climbing into the howdah, which, with some guns, she completely smashed. Ultimately the howdah gave way, and the tigress fell to the ground. The telegram unaccountably omits to state what became of the Duke.

THE Queen sent a marble bust of herself, together with an autograph letter, to Viscount and Viscountess Cranbrook, upon the attainment of their golden wedding.

THE Duchess of Albany is about to pay a short visit to Boyton Manor, the place in Wiltshire which her husband, the late Duke, rented for several years from Mr. Fane, and which he liked so much that he quitted it with reluctance when the Queen insisted on lending him Claremont. On the fourth anniversary of the death of the late Duke of Albany—the 27th ult.—the Duchess of Albany went to Windsor and visited the tomb of His Royal Highness. Several beautiful wreaths of white camellias, marguerites, violets, and other flowers, sent by Her Majesty, Princess Beatrice, and Princess Frederica, together with the Duchess's own memorial contributions, were placed near the deceased Prince's sarcophagus, which was surrounded by a tastefully arranged border of rare flowers from the Frogmore conservatories.

THE Princesses Margaret Victoria and Victoria Patricia Helena and Prince Arthur Patrick, the children of the Duke and Duchess of Connaught, accompanied by Major-General Sir Howard and Lady Elphinstone, arrived at Charing-cross from the Continent. Their Royal Highnesses drove to Buckingham Palace, where they stayed for a few days before going to Windsor Castle.

THE Emperor of Austria, accompanied by eleven Archbishops, and attended by the cathedral clergy, the Ministers of State, and a host of officers in gala uniform, walked on the 1st April in the annual procession of the Holy Resurrection, which took place at the Hofburg, and was, as usual, a most brilliant pageant, admirably ordered in all its details.

THE marriage of Harry Vane Russell, Esq., with Miss Elvina Alice Cotton, daughter of Captain and Mrs. Calveley Cotton, of the Hall, Wem, Shropshire, has been solemnized at St. George's, Hanover-square. The ceremony was performed by the Right Rev. the Bishop of Wakefield. The bride, who was given away by her father, looked well in a cream satin toilette, trimmed with antique lace, fastened with sprays of orange blossom and tuberoses; it was tied with wide watered silk ribbon. The two bridesmaids were attired in white nun's veiling, draped in front; pale blue waistcoat, sash, and cuffs; hats to correspond, trimmed with tall sprays of white lilac; posy bouquets of Maréchal Niel roses, white lilac, and lilies of the valley, tied with pale blue watered silk ribbon. The bride's train was carried by a page, Master Godfrey Arthur Stanhope Muir. He wore a velvet tail coat, adorned with onyx-steel buttons; black silk stockings, and shoes with steel buckles; he carried a cooked bat adorned with steel under his arm; a white satin waistcoat and lace tie.

PRINCE BISMARCK celebrated his seventy-third birthday on the 1st April, amid the usual attentions from his admirers, chief of whom was the Crown Prince William, who called early to offer his personal congratulations.

STATISTICS.

NOW that Emperor William of Germany is dead the oldest Sovereign in Europe is William III. of the Netherlands, whose age is 71. Her Majesty comes next with 69 years. Her reign is also the longest of the present European sovereigns. Francis Joseph of Austria and Oscar II. of Sweden are each 59 years old; Alexander of Russia and Humbert of Italy are comparatively young men, being but 44. The Mikado of Japan is 37, the Emperor of China a lad of 17, and the King of Spain an infant of 2. Don Pedro III. of Brazil has reigned since 1831, and Her Majesty since 1837.

THE cost of drilling a gas well is usually from £700 to £1,200. The method pursued is the same as for an oil-well. The weight of the drill, with the attached "jars," is 8,000 to 4,000 pounds. These rise and fall four or five feet, and are constantly rotated, so as to bring the bit into contact with the entire circumference of the drilling. For a depth of 500 feet the hole is bored 8 inches in diameter, and is cased with 3 5-8 piping. Beyond this depth the hole is continued with a diameter of 6 inches until gas shall be reached or the well abandoned. A casing of 4-inch piping is used for this lower portion. Under ordinary circumstances, about fifty days are required for the drilling.

GEMS.

CONTENTMENT is a good thing until it reaches the point where it sits in the shade and lets the weeds grow.

If perchance the cause of thine enemy come before thee, forget thy injuries, and think only of the merits of the case.

LET it be borne in mind that the cords of love which bind hearts so closely together that neither life nor death nor time nor eternity can sever them, are woven of threads no bigger than a spider's web.

In the ordinary concerns of life moral energy is more serviceable than brilliant parts; while in the more important these latter are of little weight without it, evaporating only in brief and barren flashes.

RIDICULE is a most cruel and dangerous remedy for any fault or failing, and is likely to be productive of greater evils than that upon which it bears, especially as it is almost always aimed at those things which the poor victim is thoroughly conscious of, but is not able to help.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

THE HAIR.—Castor oil and brandy—three ounces of the oil, and one of the brandy—will generally promote the growth of the hair, keep it smooth, and prevent dandruff. Rub the preparation well into the roots. Use it about twice a week.

ORANGE PUDDING.—Six oranges seeded and cut into small pieces; sweeten to taste; add yolks of three eggs, two tablespoonfuls of corn flour, one quart of hot milk; boil until it thickens, then set away to cool; when ready to serve pour over the top the whites of the eggs beaten to a froth.

TO CLEAN SILKS AND SATINS, take four ounces of soft soap, four ounces of honey, the white of an egg, and a wingglassful of gin. Mix well together, and scour the article (which must be unpicked, and laid in widths on a hiteben-table) with a rather hard brush, thoroughly. Afterwards rinse it in cold water, leave to drain, and iron while quite damp with a piece of thin muslin between it and the iron, or it will be marked on the ironed side. The silk, when laid on the table, must be kept quite smooth, so that every part may come under the brush. White silk requires a little bluing in the water.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE number of men in actual service at the present time in the armies and navies of Europe exceeds four millions, and it is said that it requires the product of one operative or peasant labourer to sustain one soldier.

MEDICINAL QUALITIES OF ONIONS.—The free use of onions for the table has always been considered by most people a healthy and desirable vegetable, and but for their odour, which is objectionable to many, they would be found more generally on our dining tables. For a cold on the chest there is no better specific, for most persons, than well boiled or roasted onions. They may not agree with every one, but to persons with good digestion they will not only be found to be a most excellent remedy for a cough, and the clogging of the bronchial tubes which is usually the cause of the cough, but if eaten freely at the outset of a cold, they will usually break up what promised, from the severity of the attack, to have been a serious one. A writer in one of our medical journals, recently recommended the giving of young raw onions to children three or four times a week, and when they get too large and strong to be eaten raw, then boil and roast them, but not abandon their free use. Another writer, advocating their use, says: During unhealthy seasons, when diphtheria and like contagious diseases prevail, onions ought to be eaten in the spring of the year at least once a week. Onions are invigorating and prophylactic beyond description. Further, I challenge the medical fraternity or any mother to point out a place where children have died from diphtheria or scarlatina angina, etc., where onions were freely used.

"NAGGING."—Disagreeable as the habit of nagging undoubtedly is, it originates in a virtue. It is not the slipshod, happy-go-lucky people that are annoyed by the faults of others—the shirking, the want of consideration, the total disregard of every plain duty. No, they are the painstaking, conscientious souls who are sorely tried by the negligence of others, the waste of time and opportunity and substance it may be; who, finding their strength unequal to bearing more than two or three times their share of the heat and burden of the day; who have again taken up the neglected tasks of others less conscientious; who have again and again stood between those others and the consequences of their own indolence, folly, stupidity, and injustice; these are the ones who give vent to their overwrought feelings in bitter complaining and reproach. And here lies the danger. A careful housewife, fully alive to the importance of thoroughness in the little things of the household, as well as in larger things in the conduct of life, sees constantly much undone on the part of husband, children, and servants, that in the constant endeavour to set them all right, to restrain this one, or to bring that one up to the requisite point, or to ward off the consequences of the thoughtlessness of this one, the habit of nagging continues to grow stronger and stronger upon her from day to day. But let her possess her soul in patience; let her be most assiduous in cultivating that "sweetness" which is the main element in Matthew Arnold's culture, and which is so often spoken of by Jonathan Edwards, stern and uncompromising Calvinist though he was. Better that the peacemakers in the kitchen should be unobserved at times by the mistress than that the house should be haunted by all the willing servants in the neighbourhood; better that the faults of the children should be lightly reproved than that they should learn to do without their mother's sympathy and love, which will most likely be the case if she pursues toward them a course of perpetual and persistent fault-finding; better that the husband's petty failings be passed over in silence than that he should learn to find his happiness away from home, perhaps in some other woman's home.

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

NORA.—Quite good enough.

MADELINE.—We regret we cannot inform you.

BOX.—Upwards of two hundred means more than two hundred.

J. N. S.—"Madeline" is the title of a French novel written by Jules Sandeau.

E. W. L.—Spruce beer is flavoured with the tender shoots of the black spruce.

FARMER'S DAUGHTER.—Headaches arise from so many causes that it would be impossible to prescribe.

A SNAKE (Tyron).—There is no special examination, but he must be tolerably well informed and write a good hand.

M. D.—"L. E. L." were the initials and literary signature of Letitia Elizabeth Landon (afterwards Mrs. Maclean), a popular English writer.

L. D.—The new President of France, Marie Francois Sadi-Carnot, was born at Limoges in 1837, of a famous family. His grandfather was Minister of War from 1793 to 1797, and was called the "organizer of victory."

FRED.—Keep yourself well posted in current topics of an interesting nature, and you will find no trouble in holding your own in society. Act naturally, and never force your opinions on any one, even though you know better.

M. D.—1. With a little persistent practice you can quickly become a first-class penman. 2. Writing that has been reversed is very easily read when held up to a looking-glass. To do this nicely considerable practice is necessary.

N. C.—1. The initials of the parties are usually engraved on the engagement ring. Diamonds and pearls are always in style. A solitary pearl would be appropriate. 2. Both too young, in our opinion. 3. The initials and date.

W. M. L.—Excessive flourishing will spoil anyone's penmanship, as it takes away from the simplicity and beauty of well-formed letters. You have refrained from this, and consequently furnish a remarkably neat specimen of chirography.

A. N. S.—The mechanical engineer is principally concerned in the manufacture of machinery, the working of metals, the construction of ships, steamers, cannon and all the various structures in which the metals bear a prominent part.

GRACE.—When on intimate terms with a gentleman, it is no breach of etiquette to honour him with an invitation to call again; when slightly acquainted, you should ascertain something about his character before extending such hospitality.

A. A. D.—One of the most efficacious corn removers is tincture of iodine, applied twice or three times a day with a camel's-hair brush. Paint thoroughly, and place a piece of thin cotton or linen rag over the spot to prevent soiling the stockings.

I. B. S.—The pawnbroker's sign of three gilded balls has its origin in the fact that the Medici family of Florence, Italy, who were great money lenders, had the same device on their coat-of-arms. "Medici" means "physician," and the three balls are in all probability a pun on the name, being intended to represent three gilded pills.

SOPHIE.—1. The idea no doubt arises from the fact that the finger of the left hand is the wedding ring finger, and the engagement ring is assumed as it were to protect the finger until the plain gold circlet takes its place. The right hand is, however, the proper one for the engagement ring, as by wearing it on the left some possible misconception might arise. 2. For an engagement ring, one set with a diamond and sapphire would be acceptable; that style of ring being very fashionable at present. 3. Wedding rings are of plain solid gold.

L. L. W.—Strict etiquette requires that a lady, meeting in the street a gentleman with whom she is acquainted, shall give the first sign of recognition. Common usage, however, does not insist on an imperative following of this rule. A well-bred man bows and raises his hat to every lady of his acquaintance whom he meets, without waiting for her to take the initiative. Of course, if the lady takes no notice of his courtesy, he is bound to assume that she does not wish him to address her at the moment, and should simply pass on.

B. B.—Some wonderful cures of snake-bite by the application of what are known as "mad-stones" have been reported, and many persons are willing to vouch for their efficacy in extracting the poisonous virus of a dog-bite. Natural specimens of these peculiar affairs are shown to be pieces of very absorbent red shale, a fine-grained rock having a slaty structure. Artificial ones are made by roasting sound, solid pieces of horn until they become thoroughly charred, and then rubbing them down to a convenient shape. In using either the natural or artificial, the wound must be slightly moistened with water, or, what would be even better, a little spirit of ammonia. The stone is then to be pressed into the wound and allowed to adhere until it drops off. Analysis has proved that the stones used by East Indian jugglers for the cure of wounds caused by venomous serpents are nothing more than pieces of charred bone. The snake-charmers in the East and the Mexicans prepare these "snake-stones," as they call them, and many wonderful cures are reported as following their use.

J. J.—Positions in the post office necessitate a civil service examination.

K. C.—Kismet is an Eastern word, meaning fate or destiny, and is used by the Orientals to express their favourite fatalism.

G. V.—You had much better stay single than to either marry a man of good habits that you don't love, or one of bad habits that you do.

PHOEBE.—In her own house or that of an intimate friend the lady should precede the gentleman when entering; in all other cases the order is reversed.

F. L.—The old song says "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." You might try it, and see if it would develop any latent affection for the young man about whom you are in doubt.

SAILOR.—If you have any prospects of getting employment it would be well to emigrate; otherwise it would be best to wait for an opportunity to go into business, unless the trip is intended for recreation only.

P. C. V.—Tar paper or insect powder will prevent the inroads of moths on the upholstery of a couch. Either should be placed in every crevice, and then the couch must be covered with a thick cloth to prevent the accumulation of dust.

A. N. C. E.—When the good Pope Gregory XIII. arranged the calendar it was fixed that every fourth hundred year, beginning with 2000, should be a centennial leap-year. Therefore all such years must be divisible by 400, ordinary leap-year by 4.

P. D.—Your natural common sense should teach you that the chances are always against the one who is foolish enough to invest his money in such a scheme. Having no personal knowledge of its whereabouts, the desired address cannot be furnished. It would be advisable to place your cash in a safer place.

WHEN FRIENDS PROVE FALSE.

When friends prove false, and joys depart,
And life seems drear to thee;
When grief lies heavy on thy heart,
Then fly, love, fly to me.
Be thou my only treasured guest,
Of all the world the dearest best;
While pillowed on this faithful breast,
From pain thou shalt be free.

A selfish, sordid soul may know
The blighting touch of care,
But hearts that feel love's genial glow
Are proof against despair.
So when life's storms around us rise,
And Fate her keenest arrow tries,
We'll gaze, love, in each other's eyes,
And read our safety thence.

Let courtiers fawn on royalty,
Well pleased a look to get;
I'd rather win a smile from thee
Than wear a coronet.
With thee, life's darkest hour is bright;
Deprived of thee, life has no light;
My heart thy throne is day and night,
My gems thine eyes of jet.

F. S. S.

F. C. D.—By gradually heating a coin the inscription will, in the majority of cases, make its appearance. Copper coins may be cleaned by immersing in sweet oil and wiping dry with a clear rag. If of silver, they should be placed for ten or fifteen minutes in a strong solution of ammonia and wiped dry with a soft towel.

H. N. W.—1. Place no dependence on the superstition that the stars exert an influence on our course of life. Such devices are resorted to by charlatans who care more for extracting the money from the pockets of their victims than the welfare of the dupes who are foolish enough to place confidence in them. 2. Truly beautiful.

MARQUETTE.—Your namesake, made famous by Goethe, could not have been more beautiful, both physically and morally. You are far above the average in polite accomplishments, and doubtless cause many a heartache among the gentlemen of your acquaintance who are striving to gain that priceless boon—the possession of your hand and heart.

Z. D.—A woman aged twenty-two, who would become the wife of a man double her age, and the father of two children, must be very anxious to marry, or else cast a covetous glance on the property of which he is the owner. When she has attained the prime of life—say thirty years—she will be sixty, requiring constant care and nursing, or else making his life a burden by his capacious, querulous manners.

C. M.—Alexander II, Czar of Russia, was born March 10, 1845, and succeeded his father, Alexander II. (who was assassinated), March 13, 1881. In 1866 he married the Princess Dagmar, daughter of the present King of Denmark and sister of the Princess of Wales and the reigning King of Greece. They have three sons and two daughters, the eldest son and heir-apparent being the Grand Duke Nicholas, born in 1868. The brothers and sisters of the Czar are: Grand Duke Vladimir, born in 1847; married, and has three sons and a daughter. Grand Duke Alexis, born in 1850. Grand Duchess Marie, born in 1853; married to the Duke of Edinburgh, and has one son and four daughters. Grand Duke Sergius, born in 1857; and Grand Duke Paul, born in 1860. The Czar has three uncles—the Grand Dukes Constantine, Nicholas and Michael—all of whom are married and have children; and an aunt—the Grand Duchess Olga—wife of the reigning King of Wurtemberg.

H. F.—You should ask the permission of the child's parents before escorting her to a social gathering.

C. V. G.—On entering a hall, theatre, or opera-house, the gentleman should walk side by side with his lady companion unless the aisle is too narrow, when he should precede her. Reaching the seats he should allow her to take the inner one, assuming the outer one himself.

B. B.—In carving a chicken, first remove the wings, legs and merry-thought (wish-bone); slice down each side of the breast; then pass the knife under the long, broad part of each neck-bone, and lift them up until they break off at the end of the shorter part of the bone which cleaves to the breast-bone. All parts being separated from the carcass, divide the breast from the back by cutting through the tender-ribs on each side, from the neck quite down to the vent or tail. Then lay the back upward on your plate, fix your fork under the rump, and laying your knife about the centre of the back press down upon it and lift the tail, or lower part of the back, and it will readily divide. This done, lay the crop or lower part of the back upward in your plate, with the centre, and cut off the side bones by forcing the knife through the rump-bone on each side of the backbone. This completes the operation. When removing the breast, wings and legs, the fork should be well pressed in the flesh just back of the wish-bone.

J. J. M.—A stable intended for the use of horses should not have a plank floor, as it proves injurious to the animals' feet, and gradually becoming permanently damp renders it dangerously unhealthy. It should be perfectly drained, and to render the flooring completely impervious to water from below it should be constructed of asphalt, or of flag set in cement, with grooved surfaces, or of bricks set on edge, or of corrugated tiles. They should slope two or three inches in ten feet toward a channel running along behind the horses. The best bedding is of wheat straw, but if this is not obtainable oat straw will answer the purpose. The bed should be level, or sloping slightly from the sides and head towards the centre, and be completely free from hard lumps. All ought to be smooth, clean, soft, and the depth of the litter about seven or eight inches. Every morning the soiled bedding should be removed, and the clean portion placed at the head of the stall. The stable should be clean swept, brushed, and thoroughly ventilated every morning, leaving no impurities on the ground or in the atmosphere. If the site selected for the stable is on perfectly dry ground, artificial flooring may be dispensed with, although it is always best to have it, if possible.

P. P. C.—Originally the Romans are said to have had a year of ten months, but in the time of their kings they adopted a lunar year of 355 days divided into twelve months, with an extra month occasionally inserted. Through the ignorance of those having charge of the matter, a great deal of confusion gradually arose, which was remedied in 45 B.C. by Julius Caesar, by the introduction of the Julian calendar, according to which the year has ordinarily 365 days, and every fourth year is a leap year of 366 days—the length of the year being thus assumed as 365½ days, while it is in reality 365 days, 5 hours, 48 minutes and 50 seconds, or 11 minutes 10 seconds less. Caesar also gave to the months the number of days which they still have. For a long time this style of reckoning time prevailed among Christian nations, and remained undisturbed until the renewed accumulation of the remaining error of 11 minutes or so had amounted, in 1582 years after the birth of Christ, to 10 complete days. This shifting had caused great disturbances by unfixing the times of the celebration of Easter, and hence of all the other movable feasts. To remedy the trouble, Pope Gregory XIII. ordained that ten days should be deducted from the year 1582, by calling what would have been reckoned the 5th of October the 15th of October, 1582; and in order that the displacement might not recur, it was further ordained that every hundredth year (1800, 1900, 2100, &c.) should not be counted a leap year, excepting every fourth hundredth, beginning with 2000. In this way the difference between the civil and the natural year will not amount to a day in 5000 years. This is called the Gregorian Calendar, and is in use in all civilized lands, with the exception of Russia, Greece, Rumania, and the minor countries belonging to the Greek confederation, where they adhere to the old style. This has caused an addition of two other days since the adoption of the calendar of Gregory, which renders it necessary, when a letter is thence addressed to a person in another country, that both the old and the new date should be given, written one above the other. This is the only change that has been made since the days of the illustrious Julius Caesar.

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